

## Squeaky Balloons

By the time the clown arrived, one of the children had vomited up ribbons of neon-colored frosting from too much cake, two were in a sugar coma on the oversized beanbag, four others were glued to the viral video of the Vermont newborn triplets farting in unison, and my daughter, Beatrice — the birthday girl — had her right arm jammed into a length of irrigation pipe in the backyard where she'd been trying to retrieve her birthday gift from a year ago, a Maine coon kitten with one eye the color of lime green sherbet, the other a sky blue marble.

If her mother were still here, she'd have known exactly what to do.

But she was not.

Beatrice had five birthdays with her mother, likely only one she might even remember as she got older and the memories of her own early years faded, like they do for all of us.

Her mother was smart, however.

The gift of the cat, she knew, would not only be something Beatrice would remember because the cat would, hopefully, live till she was a teenager, but that cat would also help cement in her brain that she did, in fact, once have a mother — and that mother loved her very much.

I was bound to make this sixth birthday another one she would remember. I'd stick to the plan my wife had written down for the party.

So, I ordered up a clown.

"We've only got a girl who failed out of clown school," the man said when I placed the order. "The rest of our veteran clowns are booked that day. But she'll be good. Takin' one of them remedial balloon courses. Had a little trouble on the poodles. But real good at simple wiener dogs," he chuckled.

"Get it?" he asked.

“Sure,” I mumbled, wishing Julia was still alive to talk about birthday party balloons.

“A wiener dog’s just a blowed-up balloon,” he said through wheezy laughs.

“I guess that will do,” I remember saying, not thinking — like my wife would have — to call another event clown vendor.

For a month before the party — and knowing it would only be good to invite Beatrice’s kindergarten classmates whom she got along with, I thought — inexplicably — that telling Beatrice her mother had planned every inch of this party before she died might lock into her mind even more how much her mother adored her.

But, ultimately, I knew that with each plan I made over the previous month, each gift I bought, each decoration I envisioned putting up — all of it, every last bit — was me performing a farewell sacrament.

This ritual had exactly one purpose: to try and prop up a body that would collapse in the drugstore aisle where they sold Julia’s favorite coconut body spritz.

A dozen times or more, after I sprayed the whole sample bottle onto my forearm at three in the morning and tried to will my dead wife back to life, the teenage clerk brought me tissues on this once-a-week ritual of grief that I held back from Beatrice because I had to cradle her in my arms every night as she fell asleep and asked me why mommy left her with someone who “can’t make my egg-in-a-hole right.”

After I put Beatrice to bed each night, I went through more of Julia’s clothes, filled a garbage bag and set it by the front door so I could drop it off at the thrift store with Beatrice after I picked her up from school. This, too, became a ritual and slowly Julia’s side of the closet emptied out until there were just a handful of her favorites left.

The thing I saved for last was a moth-holed, mustard yellow, ill-fitting sweater she loved any excuse to wear — even if there were just a chance of a slight breeze kicking up — and which I’d

made fun of because it looked so ragged.

She always told me it was the most comfortable piece of clothing she'd ever had.

As I touched it each day on the hanger in the closet that was slowly emptying out, her voice faded another notch. She was becoming more of a ghost.

After I checked on Beatrice each night and saw her sleeping soundly, I took the sweater to the recliner, sat down and draped it over my face, lost entirely, forcing myself to keep the contours of her body and the lilt in her voice at the front of my mind so she wouldn't fade.

Sometimes Beatrice would wake up in the morning and find me there with the sweater wrapped around my head. She would sometimes pull it off, put it over her head and nudge me till I got up. Or say, "I dreamed about Mommy. She said she loves us."

I hugged her, said "Yes," and instead of depositing the sweater into the thrift store bag like I promised myself I would every night, I went straight back to the closet and gingerly placed it on the designated padded hanger.

For a few months, when Beatrice was sad or when I became blue, we put a few pillows on the floor of the closet and laid down, looking up at the sweater hanging above us and shared whatever we'd done that day with the ghost of my dead wife.

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I did a quick count of the birthday guests to make sure none had gone missing, went outside into the warm rain and knelt down in the wet grass. I slithered my arm into the other end of the irrigation pipe where Beatrice's arm was inserted and thought I could help unstick her with a little nudge. The moment I got my own arm up to my shoulder, I felt the cat's tail and saw Beatrice at the other end easily slipping her arm out. Seconds later, she was standing above me, the cat in one hand and the other filled with cake. The cat's face was covered in frosting.

"Honey, I thought your arm was stuck."

“No, daddy, not stuck. Just feeding Crayon.”

She wandered off back to the party.

I tried to pull my arm out and quickly realized that, somehow, I was the one who got stuck. I told myself this was a sign to give up on this long-abandoned project to funnel grey water out of our house and into the garden. All that grew there anymore were weeds and it felt like that was appropriate.

I closed my eyes to will up the energy to continue monitoring a houseful of children with no interest in being monitored. A few moments later I was startled by the bleat of a bulb horn being squeezed above my head. I opened my eyes and saw what seemed to me the saddest clown ever. Its face was made up in colors that were dripping down the white cheeks and the big red smile was starting to turn downward.

“Hey,” it said. “HEY. I’m Lucy. Your birthday clown. It’s raining. You’ve got a zoo of children inside.”

The clown was holding a kid’s jacket above her head, trying, unsuccessfully, to protect the makeup job from being ruined.

“I’m stuck,” I said to Lucy, but she’d turned already, her gigantic floppy feet slapping across the puddles toward the house.

I then freed my arm, the quickening rain likely having had a bit of a lubricating effect.

Wet and flecked with mud, I followed the clown inside the house, grabbed a towel from the hall closet and came out to the living room where Lucy had one of the girls in her lap.

She was pulling balloons out from hidden pockets in her polka-dotted clown suit and making birds and giraffes and poodles. I guess Lucy had passed the remedial course. But even the yellow octopus she created didn’t stop the girl in her lap from crying.

“Lots of kids are scared of clowns,” Lucy said.

I knelt down.

“Angie, do you want to go home?” I asked.

She nodded and said, “My tummy hurts.”

I started in on the calls to the parents, telling them that I thought the party had to end early because Beatrice was getting a bit tired.

“And they probably overindulged in cake,” I added at the end of each call.

“Sorry if your little one comes home with a sugar high.”

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Once the last kid left — a girl whom I walked out to the car with a bagful of the last of the cake (she was the only one who didn’t seem to get any ill effects and I was happy to see it go) — I breathed easier and wondered exactly how I’d continue to navigate any more of Beatrice’s birthday parties.

I made a silent promise to myself that the rest of them would have strict limitations on invitees.

And less cake.

When I walked back into the house, Lucy had Beatrice in her lap and was reaching into hidden pockets in the clown suit, blowing up more and more balloons and attaching them to one another so that at the end she had made a caterpillar that was as tall as Beatrice and as colorful as a peacock.

It looked like it could crawl out of the house and turn instantly into a butterfly, then sail off into the sky and transform into a squeaky rainbow.

In the kind of slow motion reserved for unavoidable incidents, I could see the overindulgence in cake was finally going to hit Beatrice. I reached out to pull her from in front of Lucy, where Beatrice was standing and stroking this new balloon pet, but all my action did was

accelerate the vomit like a loose garden hose that someone turned on to full blast.

In seconds, Lucy's clown suit was streaked with extra colors.

Instead of freaking out, as I'd have expected anyone in her position to do, Lucy pulled one of her bright blue clown handkerchiefs from a pocket and wiped Beatrice's face.

"Are you sick, sweetie?" and pulled her onto her lap.

Then, to me, "You must have a little soda here from the party? Pour me a cup."

I handed Lucy a cup of Sprite and she held it to Beatrice's mouth.

"Sip on this. It'll make your tummy feel better."

"You must have kids of your own," I said.

"Nope. Not yet. I just remember this from my childhood. And I'm studying to be a pediatrician. This," she said and honked her clown horn lightly, "is to pay the bills. But the carbonation does wonders to settle the stomach. I guess I could've saved a billion dollars in tuition," she said and stroked Beatrice's forehead.

"What are we going to do about your clown suit?" I asked.

"When I go further away, I usually bring a change of clothes," she said. "It gets a bit clammy in the costume. But I live just a few miles from here so I'll just wear it home. I'll be okay."

"Absolutely not," I said. "I'm sure we've got something for you to change into. There's got to be some clothes from my late wife that will fit. You're about her height. Beatrice and I have been going through it all over the last year and we're down to the last of it. If you're not too weirded out, you're welcome to change."

I picked Beatrice up off Lucy's lap and set her on the couch.

I went to the front door and grabbed what was the last bag of Julia's clothes and started pulling out a few pairs of jeans, some T-shirts.

"Sure, that would be fine," Lucy said. "I have to get home and wash the clown suit, too. I'll

get fined 20 percent of my next paycheck if I don't."

Beatrice asked for more soda, drank it down and it seemed like she'd completely forgotten about being sick just minutes before. The balloon caterpillar that Lucy had made kept Beatrice entranced.

"Daddy, can we listen to Steve Kittens?" she asked.

Beatrice meant Cat Stevens. Julia's favorite movie was 'Harold and Maude,' the soundtrack for which was end-to-end Cat Stevens. We probably watched it 50 times with Beatrice, the music being the primary influence on her as the film's intricately-staged fake suicides, intergenerational romance, and middle finger thrown up so perfectly at conformity would have been well beyond Beatrice's understanding. But the music. The music infected her.

I opened up the record player and took the "Harold And Maude" album out of its well-worn sleeve and started it up. I'd spent hundreds of dollars on the rare limited release and it had become our family's anthemic music cure-all.

Beatrice started dancing with her caterpillar as the record's B-side's 1<sup>st</sup> track, "Where Do the Children Play" rolled out of the speakers — "*...I know we've come a long way. We're changing day to day. But tell me, where do the children play?*"

Lucy said, "I haven't met many people who know 'Harold and Maude.' It was my mom and dad's anniversary film. They met at a revival showing at an art theater in New York."

Lucy and I sat and watched Beatrice dance with her balloon partner through the next song, "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out" and it struck me she was pretty much living as perfect a life as her mother could wish.

For someone who had tried to will a sign from my wife and who believed there was no such thing as contact from the dead, I chose to give this coincidence some meaning.

"You can change in the bathroom, Lucy." I said. "And since it's already wet and getting a bit

chilly, I've got something else for you.”

I went into the bedroom, pulled the sweater off the hanger and held it to my chest.

“Goodbye, Julia. I found someone who’s going to appreciate this. I’ll tell her all about you.”

Then, thinking about Maude’s line in the movie that was Julia’s favorite. “This clown today, sweetie – you’d get along with her – she’s your species.”