

Soliloquy

By Ken Stark

Winter was still a month away, but I could already see it peeking over the horizon like the tip of a distant sail. Once was, I could shrug it off like a polar bear, but old bones don't like the cold. Even looking out at that dark, slate sky brought a twinge to my back, so I closed the curtain and edged the thermostat a few degrees higher.

The computer chimed, and Thomas let me steal a corner of the chair to check my email. It was Kim, just checking in. A phone call would have been nicer, but I couldn't complain when I saw that she'd tacked on a picture of little Tyler. He was in a park, clutching onto a big, red balloon, and beaming a wide, goofy grin. Behind him, the park stretched on to infinity, with trees and flowers and rolling hills and people everywhere; playing with their dogs, flying kites, skateboarding, cycling. Yet even with all of that beauty and colour and activity all around him, every bit of Tyler's attention was on that big, red balloon hovering over his head.

I sent back a few quick lines about how big the boy was getting, and about how I looked forward to them coming out in the summer, then I saved the picture and enlarged it to fill the screen. And then I just sat there and gazed at that cute little kid frozen in that perfect moment of sheer joy. And I envied him.

There was a time in my life when the most important thing in the world was a big, red balloon. I don't remember it, but I'm sure that it happened. It might have been at a fair or a circus, or maybe it was just a big sale at the used car lot up on the highway, but I have no doubt at all that at some point in my life, my mother tied a string securely around my wrist, and I gazed up at a big, red balloon as the most wonderful thing anyone had ever seen. Kim must have had that moment, too, but I don't remember it any more than I do my own. I wasn't the most attentive of fathers, but Emma was too doting a mother for it not to have happened.

As much as I missed Kim and little Tyler, she was right to move away. No one should grow old in the same town they grew up in. With every passing day, another little piece of that world is nibbled away, and it's gone for good. Eventually, all that remains are memories, fading away like photographs left too long in the sun. But memories are funny things. The human mind can't abide a void, so it fills in the

missing details, and over time, those spurious recollections become the crystal-clear memories of a contrived ideal, and everything that's come since can't help but pale in comparison.

Thomas uttered a somniferous little grumble, so I gave him a gentle scratch between the ears and relinquished the chair back to him. He acknowledged the kindness through half-lidded eyes, and with the alchemy of physics known only to cats, magically expanded himself to fill the space. Good for him. He was old, too, so he deserved his comfort. I gave him another scratch, and when he started to purr like a kitten, I let him be. And suddenly, I found myself standing in the middle of the livingroom, wondering what to do with my day.

It was always easier with Emma. I hadn't appreciated it at the time, but ultimately *everything* was easier with Emma. Back then, I probably complained every time she dragged me out of the house, but what I wouldn't give now for one more chance to hold her purse outside of a change-room or spend a boring afternoon playing whist at the in-laws. At last, I eased myself into the recliner with a sigh and did what I'd done so many times before. I took Emma's framed picture from the end table and gazed longingly at her pretty face.

"I miss you, my love," I said aloud, then I closed my eyes, cradled Emma against my chest, and descended into a blissful reverie.

The pain was still there, but the tears were long gone. Now there was only warmth in my heart as I watched the a carousel of memories swirling all about me and began to snatch images down at random. Emma in her wedding dress; nervous as could be, but glowing like a tiny sun. Both of us cooing over a newborn little girl. The three of us reclining on the back porch of our brand new home. Emma setting flame to the mortgage papers and both of us dancing around like fools. An ill-timed disco tune at my retirement dinner that had us wind up in a tangle on the floor and laughing so hard we might never be able to stop. Our 50th anniversary, when she'd surprised me by insisting we stay home with a pizza and a movie. And then came the memory of her bundled up in our bed, and I stopped the carousel to spare myself the inevitable anguish.

I gave Emma a little kiss and put her gently back on the end table, then I sat there for a long time; thinking, remembering, wondering. I'd had a good life. I'd loved and I'd been loved, so it was probably better than most. But was this it now? Was this all I had? Memories? Was there nothing more?

At last, I pried myself out of the recliner, gave Thomas another scratch between his ears, and headed for the front door with an unfamiliar bounce in my step. And as I pulled the door open and stepped outside, I was consumed by a single thought.

In this sprawling, modern metropolis of a city, I wondered, how hard could it be to find a big, red balloon?