

Floating Away

by Jamie Holweger

Henry Mince's eyes popped open as his father, Theodore, shouted for him to get out of bed. Henry sat up, groggy, dreaming it was morning and his mother had just come in to wake him. He opened his eyes, looked around the room and realized yes, he had been dreaming. She always had woken him softly and slowly, not with a shout, like his dad. He crept out of bed, his feet cold against the wood floor. He came out of his room just in time for his father to say a quick goodbye before he was out the door for work, leaving Henry to fend to himself until supper time.

Henry shuffled around the house, getting ready for the day. He walked to the bathroom for his morning shower, his feet creaking on the floorboards, the only noise in the house. He finished up in the bathroom, brushing his hair and teeth, and made way for the kitchen to have some breakfast. He was still so sleepy; he could almost close his eyes remembering when the house would be filled with the aroma of bacon on the skillet. He walked in to the room, his mouth instantly beginning to salivate with the fond memory, only to open his eyes to an empty room. No bacon, no parents, just cold, hard cereal in a ceramic bowl for Henry this morning.

After breakfast, Henry wandered around the house, bored to death. He passed by his fathers' room and saw with contempt that the bed remained unmade. In fact, upon a second glance, Henry saw that the entire house was in need of a good cleaning. Towels lined the bathroom floor, dishes piled up in the kitchen sink, and all sorts of crummies scattered along the wood floors of the entire house. *I have got to get out of here...*, Henry thought to himself. He shivered; the mere thought of being alone in there all day was beginning to make him antsy. *I think I'll head down to the park*, he decided. And with the swift decision, Henry grabbed his backpack containing his wallet as well as other various items and set off from the house.

Henry practically sprinted to the park and was there in no time. He looked around seeing clear blue sky, white fluffy clouds and just the slightest breeze to cool the skin. In fact, it was so beautiful that Henry was not the only person to come there that day. Several people were strewn about playing Frisbee, having picnics and just enjoying themselves. As Henry walked toward his favorite bench, he noticed a vendor near the water's edge selling balloons. *That's just what I need today*, Henry thought to himself. He quickly calculated the money he had with him and walked toward the vendor, wondering if he would have enough to buy a balloon.

"Good morning young sir." the vendor exclaims cheerfully, "What can I do for you today?"

"How much for a balloon?" Henry asks the man.

"Fifteen cents. Any particular color you'd like?"

"Well, my favorite color's green. Do you have any green ones in there? I can't see any."

"Why sure I do. Green one coming up."

The vendor reaches into the back of the cart and emerges with a huge, bright green balloon. Henry watches as the man carefully untangles his balloon string from the rest of the bunch. Everything is so bundled up, Henry wonders why the man doesn't just wait to blow up and tie the balloons while he's at the park. It seems like it would be a lot easier. Finally the vendor frees the balloon and hands it over to Henry.

"How come I've never seen you here before?" asks Henry.

The vendor looks at him kindly, used to answering children's questions and explains that he's just working here today, from the next town over and asks Henry to tell all of his friends to stop on by and pick up

balloons for themselves. Henry just thanks the man and walks away, balloon in hand, thinking how he doesn't have anyone to tell about the vendor. *Who would listen to me anyway?* he wonders as he makes his way to his bench.

Henry sat down with a great thud and sighed heavily. Sitting there, his mind began to wander back to the times he used to come here with his mother. He loved watching her when she would go up to the river bank and gently run her fingers through the water. She would kneel down, place her hand in the water, close her eyes and run her fingers back and forth through the flowing stream.

Lost completely in thought, Henry closed his own eyes and spread his fingers, as though he was dipping them in the stream. He trickled his fingers all around, like fingers on piano keys, and imagined the cool, running water in between them. He began to imitate the motion with his other hand, when he suddenly felt something slip right through his fingers. *Oh no!* he thought as his eyes jerked open just in time to see his balloon floating away through the sky. He jumped up onto the bench, trying desperately to reach it, but it was too high up. He would never get it. Henry plopped back down on the bench and threw his head into his hands. *How could I have been so stupid!?!* he screamed to himself. Henry sat there for a moment silently. *Maybe I should just go back home.* He thought, *No, quitters never win. I have to find it.* And, with that resolve, he leapt off the bench and ran towards town.

Henry ran and ran and before he knew it, he was back on the main street, looking around frantically, trying to find someone to ask for help. Henry spotted the barber out in front of his shop, sitting on a bench, his face outstretched towards the sun. Breathless, Henry came to a halt right in front of the man.

"Excuse me sir. Did you see a big green balloon pass by here not too long ago?" he asked the man.

"Oh, Henry," The barber said, "You startled me. No, I can't say that I have. But I wasn't looking."

"Oh" Henry replied, as he looked to the ground disappointed.

"Why don't you sit here and chat for a minute?"

"Oh, okay." said Henry, as he slid onto the bench next to the barber.

"How's everything going at home?"

"Okay I guess."

"Only okay?"

"Yeah. Things are still kind of hard there. Dad doesn't talk to me about mom and I'm not really sure how to feel."

"Henry, do you mind if I tell you what I've learned over the years?"

"Sure.", Henry replied, kind of nervous, but also kind of relieved.

"Well, in my experience, losing a loved one is tricky. You know they're not coming back, but you can't stop thinking about them. Every little detail. When my wife passed, I spent so much time thinking about her. Going around the house, into the rooms where she did her work and imagining her every movement. Even silly things like washing dishes or sewing. It drove me crazy. Everyone was worried about me. Stopping by my house all the time to see if I wanted to talk, trying to keep me company. But, I didn't want company. I just wanted her back. Is that kind of how you feel right now?"

Henry contemplated the question. "I guess, except, no one has really stopped by to check on us. It's just me and dad."

The old man lowered his eyes to Henry's and said, "Do you want to know how I got through it?"

"Uh-huh," said Henry, looking at the man expectantly.

"Well, it took a long time, but I realized that even though I can't see her, she's always watching over me. We can still talk about things. I still consult with her on all of the decisions I make and she still scolds me when I make the wrong ones. Of course I still miss her every day, but I also know that I'll see her again when I get to heaven."

"I suppose I never thought of my mom as still watching over me. I just have been thinking of her as gone. I miss all the things we used to do together."

"Son, I know it seems like she's gone, but you should still talk to her. Next time you have a problem, just ask her what she thinks and I'm sure the answer will come to you in no time. Why don't you try it sometime?"

"Okay, I will."

"You probably want to get along and find that balloon of yours. Tell your dad to stop by the shop and see me sometime, okay?"

"Okay, bye." said Henry.

Henry hurried towards his school; sure that someone over there had seen his balloon. *If it's not there, I don't know where to look.* He ran and ran until he came upon the school. The playground was full of kids. Henry leaned up against the chain link fence, slightly panting, watching them, and trying to decide who to ask for help. Just the thought of talking to them was starting to make him nervous. His palms were just beginning to sweat when he felt a hard poke on his shoulder.

"Hey what are you doing out here?" a girl asked Henry.

"What's wrong with standing out here?" Henry asked the girl.

She looked about his age. Henry remembered seeing her around school, but he had never talked to her before.

"Well, all the stuff to play on is in there," as she pointed beyond the fence.

To that Henry replied, "I'm not trying to find somewhere to play. I'm trying to find my balloon. Have you seen it anywhere? It's green."

"Uh, no. Haven't seen anything. Where do you think it went?"

"Not sure. I was just at the park and it kind of slipped out of my hand."

"What do you mean 'slipped out of your hand'?"

"I don't know, it just kind of floated off when I wasn't looking," Henry answered, slightly embarrassed.

"Well, we better get going if we're gonna find it."

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"Oh, I just thought if you needed help finding it, I could help you. There's this creek out behind my block and I find stuff there all the time. Should we check it out?"

"Okay, I guess."

Henry followed the girl and thought and wondered, *Wasn't she busy playing with the other kids? Why would she want to help him?* They were practically strangers. Henry didn't even know her name.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Lucy. You're Henry right? I remember we once had gym class together. How come you never talked to me? Are you shy or something?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, I don't think there's anything wrong with not wanting to talk sometimes. My sister says I talk too much. Anyone ever say that to you?"

Henry tried to answer, but Lucy just kept right on talking, "Probably not. You haven't said more than two words yet. That's what my mom says when people don't talk. I bet your mom says that to, doesn't she?" Lucy stopped walking and turned around to look at him.

Henry looked to the ground and nervously answered, "No, I don't have a mom anymore."

"What do you mean anymore?"

"Well, she died in the spring."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. What happened?"

"Not really sure. I know she was sick for a long time. My dad said she went to heaven."

Lucy turned and began walking again, "My grandma went to heaven too. My parents said it's beautiful there and everyone's happy. They said someday we'll all go up there to see her."

"That's what everyone has been saying to me too."

"Do you believe it?"

"Not sure. What do you think?"

Lucy paused to glance towards the sky, "Yeah, I believe in heaven. I think it's nice to imagine a place where you can meet up with your family again after you're gone."

"I suppose it does sound kind of nice, if you really think about it."

"So, do you miss her?"

"Who? My mom? Yeah, I miss her all the time. We were best friends. I can't stop thinking about her."

"My parents said it's good to think about people after they're gone. They said that's how we remember them."

Henry was silent and thought about what Lucy had just told him. *That makes a lot of sense.*

"Hey Lucy?" Henry asked as he tapped her on the shoulder.

Lucy stopped for a moment and looked at him, "Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening." Henry replied shyly.

"Hey, no problem. That's what friends are for. Come on this way. Follow me."

Lucy turned and ran. Henry quickly followed, afraid he might lose her. She was so fast that she wasn't looking as she was running through branches and one bounced back and smacked Henry right in the face. He covered his face with his hands, trying to see if he had been cut in any way, when Lucy said, "Well, here it is," as she outstretched her arms, presenting the creek.

Henry looked out. Not a sign of anyone anywhere. Cool clear water flowing in the stream beyond a clearing. There were lots of bushes all around and Henry thought, *This was a good idea. I can see why she thought of it.*

"Okay, let's divide and conquer," said Lucy. She pointed over towards the water, "You go look over there and I'll check out this side."

"Alright," Henry replied as he started off toward the creek bank. He wandered around looking for that familiar green balloon, when he found himself distracted by the water. It was there, flowing so peacefully that Henry couldn't resist placing his hand in and letting it run through his fingers. Cool and calm. He breathed in and out steadily, watching his sadness just float away with the water. He felt like everything was going to be okay. He breathed out one more time and opened his eyes. There, just inside a lilac bush, was a familiar green color. Henry jumped up and ran over towards the bush shouting, "Lucy, over here!"

Henry reached his arm into the bush and emerged with his balloon. It was deflated and mangled. Fighting the urge to cry, he dropped the ruined latex on the ground. His hands were just staring to make their way to his face when Lucy appeared. She looked to the ground and saw what had happened to the balloon. "Oh, what a bummer," she said as she placed a hand on his shoulder, "Hey, let's head back to the park and start a game of tag with everybody." And with that, she whipped around and took off back the way they had just come, eager to play with all the kids on the playground.

Henry stood there for a moment just staring at his balloon. Then his gaze slowly went towards the water. He watched it flow and knew that everything would be okay, someday. He remembered everything that the old man and Lucy had said to him today. *They just might be right*, he thought to himself.

"Hey Lucy, wait for me." Henry shouted as he took off running after his new friend.

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