

 DESCRIAL 

By Marissa Thornberry

**R**ED STOPPED HER, and her eyes turned eastward. It must be the flitting of a cardinal, or maybe some kind of woodpecker, she thought, though she couldn't remember if either was native to these parts.

She looked ahead at the trail before her, and behind, and toward the distant craggy cliff, now dusk-drenched, that had followed her for the last who-knows-how-many miles. Taking note of where a small path veered off the trail, she veered with it. She typically didn't consider herself one to depart from the prescribed way, but out here in the woods she was not quite the same.

The red flashed ahead of her, disappearing behind heavy trees and appearing again between them as she walked. When she made it to a grassy clearing, she saw the red take a round, rubbery form high above her. Neither sinking nor ascending, it hovered alone. The sunlight broke through the forest and she caught herself staring, bewildered by the buoyant ball of air and wondering how she could possibly be here in a wild wood staring at a mysterious floating red balloon.

Its subtle, rhythmic pulse made it appear almost human. It breathed calmly, greeting her with wide waves in its tail. Its solo celebration looked almost like mourning, and she counted it worth capturing.

As she reached her left arm backward to grab her sketchbook out of her pack, she heard a rustle near her that she attributed to wind or squirrels or birds whose names she didn't know. Still, the sound was unsettling in its interruption of this intimate moment. Something in it felt wrong.

She pulled the small leather-bound book out of an elastic side pocket, and the slap of the stretchy material against the pack was the second unwelcome disturbance that threatened to pull her out of this covenant, this commitment to be locked together with an object unfit for its surroundings. As long as she looked at it, it seemed, the balloon would not move. She feared that turning away would cause it to disappear; the episode was too wonderfully odd to allow for such a risk.

Something heavy moved again. This time she knew there was a presence near her, large and looming. The balloon floated, still as ever.

She saw an auburn mass grow suddenly tall in the periphery of her vision. The creature craned its neck about, then dropped back down with a thud.

Don't run. Grizzlies are faster than people—she knew that much. Her mind, however, was outrunning whatever further instructions she knew of for situations like this. The bear's head descended half the length of its legs, its ears went flat, and it growled low. Although her new floating friend was high enough to be out of any real danger, she feared for the delicate piece of rubber hanging overhead. If the bear did somehow reach it, those claws and teeth that she knew were coming for her could easily destroy that balloon in an instant, and it would come falling down to the

ground, deflated and defeated. She couldn't let that happen. She knew she couldn't protect it, but still she wished she could.

The bear charged toward her, and she collapsed. Whether it was out of fear or precaution, no party present could tell; but she fell.

Play dead. She remembered it after she was already facedown with her hands over the back of her neck. She pretended to be invisible, like she used to do as a kid. All her thoughts were images, memories mysteriously featuring a round red guest.

She lay still. The only movement in her was her wild pulse and as little respiration as she could manage. With her face in the grass, she closed her eyes and thought of the balloon—calm and steady; silent and still; until her entrance, unnoticed.

Something cold and rough grazed her hands. She felt a sharp weight push her hard into the ground. Look deader, she thought. For a moment she imagined her heartbeat must be causing her to bounce inches high; the next, she supposed it must have stopped altogether. Stripes of pain shot through her arm. She felt the blood run down, and it took all her effort to keep from screaming. You're dead, she told herself. Show no pain. Be unseen.

Enough time passed as she lay there with her eyes shut tight that she thought maybe it had been a dream. Maybe it hadn't happened. Maybe she was in her ordinary bed in her ordinary house, waking to an ordinary day. The wounds still stung and bled, but the grass was comfortable. Silence—the thick, wet, breezy kind of silence that occurs in the woods immediately following an encounter with a wild bear—permeated the scene. She had no way of knowing how long it had been since she heard the last traces of pawsteps. She still felt pain in her arm and soreness in her body, but by God the bear was gone. She opened her eyes. She looked around tentatively and noticed that red soaked the grass. She pulled off her pack and turned over, searching for she knew not what. The sky looked inviting—big and empty and blue.