

Glass Balloons

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I JOURNEY TO NAMELESS SHORES TO WRESTLE GLASS BALLOONS FROM OTHER WOMEN.

We eat potato salad and meaty gooseneck barnacles that slip out like socks from boots. We tease each other about love and lust and drink black coffee from steel thermoses. Along the beach there is sand, driftwood, grass, a spine of rock, snakes of kelp. Beyond that there is the ocean, the wind, the firmament, and the circular current of our prized balloons.

We tie ourselves up in knots to win glass balloons. But first we suck flesh from urchins and lick cream off tarts and eat blackberry pie from the pan. The other women call this sweet part of the meal *chumiss*. It is an old word for that which is very satisfying, to be well fed. I hear the word in the wind and in the waves, and it rubs against my deepest longings. *Chumisssss*.

This island is desolate, empty. Except for the deer and the dead buried under the meadow. We visit the meadow and walk among the wood crosses before starting our contest. The hands of time have scrubbed some of the names away, but the women each bring strips of stories of fallen sisters and brothers and husbands and children, and they weave them together like cedar hats. Stories of singing and of dancing and of filling jars with jam, of drumming and of laughing and of stirring fish head soup, of hanging and of burning and of falling from great heights, of drinking and of shooting and of drowning and of drowning in cold darkness.

I ask, How can you carry so many sorrows? A woman with cheeks like rising loaves of dark rye, amorphous and soft-edged, answers: With many hands and large baskets. Though it is a truth, I think she is teasing me about the baskets. The other women have baskets filled with glass balloons in every corner of their cracked homes. I have none in my home on the hill, and I wonder how I can ever win one from women with hearts of this musculature.

We sit in the silky grass and laugh about baskets of glass balloons and the tricks the women play on each other. Sometimes they plant light bulbs, the fast kinds that illuminate vanity mirrors, halfway into the sand. The bulbs shine in the sun just like our precious balloons, and it is a clever trick, but I hope they do not ever play it on me. I crave astonishment and seam-bursting surprise, not more empty promises and cruel illusions.

While we wait for the tide to drain away and to reveal what it has delivered, we share shreds of dried salmon from a plastic baggie and drink more coffee. The salmon comes from smokehouses where the women huddle together in the evenings to fold the fish over cedar sticks. The women map out meals as they work, they marvel at the growth of little ones, they cluck their tongues at troubles in the village, they plan small celebrations of life. Sometimes I join them, though I am clumsy with a knife and I split wood too slowly to keep the smoke thick. But I know how to listen, and what I hear hints at my oldest hungers.

When it is time, we hike around the island to where the beach unfolds like velvet, and I think about how all journeys follow the circumferences of circles. The hands of time. The orbit of planets. The metamorphosis of sand into green bottles of sake into glass balloons that keep fishing nets afloat into gifts that drift back to the sand at our feet. It is not the balls themselves we treasure, say the women, it is their journey, long and unlikely. Glass balloons circulate in the same ocean currents for years and years. Only a disturbance—some sort of friction—can change circumstance. Like a storm or a shift in tidal patterns or the bitter ending of a love affair.

Along the way one of the women tells a story, a favourite that has been retold many times. Two men working on a fish farm over there, she says and points at a nearby island, make a bet. The first one to find a glass ball got all his cooking and clothes washing done by the other man until the end of summer.

One of the women interrupts to ask, Could they even cook, or nah?

Pffft! The storyteller replies, Nah! Not even!

We laugh and climb up the steps of basalt.

So anyways, she goes on, one of the men gets up real early one morning and takes a cup of coffee down to the beach to watch the sun come up. And the light got brighter and brighter and when it did, he started to see like a real bright circle of light bouncing in the water. So he gets all excited and takes off his shoes and rolls up his work pants and starts going in the water to get the glass ball that's floating in the tide. And it's not a small one neither. But it's still quite a ways away and the water is too cold, so he has to wait. And just as it gets real close, there's a loud *Bang!* Just like that. And there's this real big splash and little pieces of glass floating all over the place. So he turns around and sees the other man on the rocks all smiling like that. With a shotgun in his hand. And he says, if I can't have it, neither of us will.

Ay-ha! The women cry out, chuckling.

We duck under an arch of rock and pass through the wind-splintered branches. Everywhere the sand is wet and strewn with seaweed. Our eyes flutter madly, searching for round green glints in the sun. Glass balloons can come in sizes as big as my head and the women hang these giants from their ceilings in small hammocks. More common though are the ones the size of a grapefruit. Big or small, there is always a button of melted glass at one end that reminds me of a nipple on a perfect breast. Not our breasts of course, which sag and sway as we start across the beach, ready to run at the first sign of glassy reflection.

We navigate through the dispersed crowds of moonsnails and wrinkled clamshells, giggling and uttering unintelligible sounds of anticipation. Tiny fragments of beach glass are scattered in the sand like an unfinished mosaic of blues and greens and whites. These fragments, with their pale glints, play tricks on my mind. Everywhere I look, I feel the impulse to run for glass balloons that are not there.

One of the women squeaks out a noise and starts to run toward an outcrop of rock in the distance. The hurly-burly begins with squealing and shouting. We nudge each other as our hips waddle into a clumsy sprint, and soon there is shoving and tripping. Two of the women are thrown to the sand and sacrificed like virgins tossed into volcanoes. Our soft bodies bounce against one another, and the gentle folds of our girth applaud us as we race. Our breath is cut short by our laughter. My eyes pay attention to only the rocks growing nearer, not to the rocks under my feet. I catch my toe and fall to the ground.

There I slouch in the sand like a sullen child. When the women return, I have finished picking grit from the cut in my knee. They are breathless and joyful, bursting at the seams, while I am crestfallen and inconsolable. They sit around the place where I stumbled and sprinkle sugar on peeled plant stems. Slowly we sift our hands through the bits of broken shells and pebbles and anemone tentacles and we search for dentalium teeth in silence. After some time, the woman with the rye-bread cheeks holds out the glass balloon she won. It is small and green and etched with the scars of its long journey.

If you can't have it, she says, none of us will.

I cradle the gift in my hand, imagining the basket I can now weave to carry my glass balloon and my sorrows. I hear that word—*Chumissss*—in the wind and in the waves and my deepest longings are satisfied. Where I stumbled is where my oldest hungers are well fed.