



The Park in the Center of Town
(Flash Fiction, 621 Words)
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I sat on a bench I had always liked. The tree limbs swayed in a memory of picnic blankets rolled across clean grass. Ghosts of joggers breathed heavily as they ran by in my mind, stepping lightly. This was a place where neighbor met neighbor with a coffee cup loaded hand. Faces used to smile, laughing closely with no masks and no concern for vaccination records.

The day I visited, the playground was empty. Caution tape was wrapped around the swing set and the slides. Orange plastic construction webs were fastened with zip ties to the entrances. It looked like a hazardous waste site. I turned a little so it was out of my view. So I could still pretend. I looked down the hill, across to the clearing with benches. Just far enough away that I could hear the children playing.

The voices were a surreal break from isolation. Two mothers with brightly colored cloth masks pushed their strollers in the park. Six-feet apart, to be sure. Both had young boys with them who carried balloons. Maybe they were coming from a birthday party. Maybe school had ended. When did school end? What month were we in? Maybe they just wanted balloons.

The mothers waved to me, I waved back. We all smiled with our eyes. The boys were wearing smaller brightly colored masks. The mothers docked with a picnic table and sat at opposite ends. Through all of this they never broke their discussion. CDC - virus - vaccine - sanitizer - lungs - hospitals - surfaces - masks - dinner - husband - work - Zoom - office - pajamas - boredom - kids - supermarket. The boys ran with their balloons.

"Not too close, boys," one of the mothers said.

I stared at the balloons in a daze. They floated through the wind at the edge of string. Red balloon. Blue balloon. Red balloon. Blue balloon. I imagined them inflating larger and larger. I imagined the surface turning into a lung. I imagined the boys being lifted away by balloons inhaling and exhaling rapidly, struggling to breathe, choking, the boys jerked into the sky as the lung-balloons tried to find an atmosphere they could breathe. Huge lungs, filled up with air, and water, and anxiety, and fear, and amazon boxes, and friends we missed, and jobs we lost, and toilet paper, and guns, and the \$100,000 a year salary we needed just to get by even while trapped at home, and the lying government who created regulatory agencies only to allow them to be funded by the corporations those agencies were supposed to regulate, and the politicians who came up with new ways to pass the blame and use a deadly virus to further their agendas, and the balloons got so big they blotted out the sun, the sun and fresh air we needed to stay healthy and human, and the balloons never popped they just kept getting larger and more infected and choking us all until we learned to live off a single breath per day.

"Boys! Too close!" a mother yelled.

The boys started hitting each other's balloons. Red balloon. Blue balloon. Red balloon. Blue balloon.

They didn't listen.

POP.

The blue balloon fell to the ground at the end of its string, a dead latex clump. The blue balloon boy was upset. He pushed the red balloon boy.

"Boys! OK we're leaving," the other mother announced.

They collected their boys, undocked their strollers, and waved cordially to each other as they exchanged the familiar salutations of a world we all lost.

This is why I didn't want to come to the park in the center of town.