

The Balloon

The boy and the girl sat cross-legged on the ground facing one another, their knees touching. They had been playing with toys and talking of things real and imaginary, as children do. The girl reached into her pocket and pulled out a balloon. "Blow this up for me."

"OK," said the boy, and took it in his hand. "It looks funny."

"I think it's special. Blow it up."

He put it in his mouth and began to blow. As it swelled, its wrinkles smoothed but did not disappear even when it reached basketball size. The boy continued to blow rhythmically and steadily, and the balloon continued to grow. When it reached two feet in diameter, the girl became concerned.

"You'd better stop. I'm afraid it will pop."

"No it won't. It's not even tight yet." He kept blowing. Soon it had reached five feet across. The girl had to move back to make room for the balloon between them. The children could no longer see one another. They could only watch the ever-expanding balloon. The boy, fascinated by its size and seemingly unlimited capacity, kept compulsively exhaling into the rubber opening.

"Stop!" ordered the girl.

"Not yet."

"Now!" It's my balloon."

"Oh, all right." He stopped, pinching the mouthpiece between his thumb and forefinger.

"Let the air out." He let go, but nothing happened.

"I think it has a valve. The air can get in, but not out."

"What will we do with it? We can't take it inside now. It's too big. And if we leave it out here, it will blow away."

"I don't know. We could take turns watching it."

"Not at night. We have to go to bed."

"That's true."

"Maybe we should pop it."

"No. It's too big. It would hurt our ears when it exploded. Besides, then we wouldn't have the balloon."

"This is all your fault. You wouldn't stop blowing."

"You asked me to blow it up. It's your balloon. You should have known it would get big."

"How could I have known? I don't know anything about balloons."

"Anyway, what do you want to do about it?"

"We could tie a string on it at night, so it won't blow away, and watch it during the day so no one steals it."

So they did. One or both of them faithfully watched the balloon day after day. Their lives centered around the huge balloon in their back yard. At first, all their friends came over to play, curious about the giant sphere. But the novelty wore off, and soon the other children stopped coming. The boy, the girl, and the balloon were left alone.

They began to think of the balloon as a living thing. It seemed to shiver in the breeze. It expanded on hot sunny days, and sagged on cold cloudy ones. But mostly it stayed the same. And, the days stayed the same. There was nothing to do but watch the balloon. Finally, after several months, the girl noticed a change. "It's smaller," she said.

"I don't see any difference," replied the boy.

But it was indeed smaller, and it shrank almost imperceptibly each day. As time went by, the slow leak reduced the balloon to normal size, and at last to a flat wrinkled piece of rubber. The children no longer needed to watch the balloon. They could go back to playing games with other children anywhere they wanted. But somehow, nothing was ever quite the same again.