

Balloonman

Liza Slater

Looking back

I've lost them. The ribbon has been cut to this bridge which our son engineered, that they say is a marriage between art and science. My wife Helen is striding out front there somewhere, arm in arm with our son Eddie. Me, I'm back here. I'm not one for crowds. All those people surging behind you, it just makes me nervous. If they get too excited or just have to get somewhere, they'll trample you. You see I'm a balloon man. I make animals out of balloons. You know mainly to thrill the kiddies. Something for them to take away from the side show; more permanence than fairy floss, more impermanence than memory. That's what I love about the balloon figures the most, their impermanence; beauty is after all. If the crowd, who are the first ever to cross this bridge, were to look below to their right, they would see the cities only permanent fair. The fair, or carnie as we jokingly call it, has yet to stir for the day. Mornings come late to those of us with a preference for in betweens rather than crossings.

'We' are of course very proud of our son. I want to be proud of my son. He calls me Harry, never Dad. I've never grown use to it. I do give myself some credit for my son's career. A little that is. I'm not for parents sharing too much of their children's limelight. So much of who they are, is who they are. But as I tried to explain to Helen once, my career path although appearing to be extremely different, isn't really. Well of course it is, but isn't, also. I believe Eddie's love of bridges comes from my own love of building bridges. That's what I do, I believe, as a balloon man. The bridge between the dream and holding the dream. It is after all the imagination that pursues the kiddie into wanting, lets say a giraffe for a pet. And after all it is the imagination that transforms the balloon into the giraffe the child wanted. Remember how much you wept over the loss of your special toy. The joy upon its return.

What led Eddie to become the engineer of this bridge? This bridge that causes people to smile and to get up early to be the first to cross it. Was it planned from a young age? Or was it just a series of decisions that he hardly knows he made? Thinking back over his growing up I always get tangled in my own. From up here it all seems so clear the connection between this bridge of Eddie's and what I do. How much difference is there between what I do and Eddie's chosen profession? A lot some would say. But is there? Every structure, no matter how big, eventually crumbles. This I have always known but just haven't known how to thread it into words. It is the very essence of my chosen career: what is will change no matter what. The lime green sausage balloon dog that so thrills the child, will deflate, become forgotten, lost, or accidentally get squished between the wall and a leg of a chair. We take the rubber of dreams and attempt to twist it into reality, ending up with knotted balloon giraffes, sausage dogs, and poodles. Despite that we grow to love them.

What I wanted to tell you is what I can see from up here. I get easily side tracked. Helen points this out to me. It's true. There I am making a family dinner, chopping up the vegies, marinating the meat, and before I know it I'm fixing the leg of a chair that's been rickety for too long. Helen fails to see the connection, only that I'm dithering over dinner. I would argue, if I was one for arguing, that for a successful family dinner it's best if there is a sense of security at the family table. "Dinner will be late, yet again!" Helen hates a late dinner. It upsets her routine. She likes to walk her babies directly after dinner and then is one to retire early with a good book. She's an avid reader. It's not for me. I've always been one to use my hands.

School was not a good time for me. It sticks with you, all that school torment. I was always so big. People either gave me a hard time about it or expected me to be what I wasn't. It wasn't that I was a fat child, just a lot older looking than my years. People looked at my body, not at me. Of course I was expected to be a sportsman: a child thrust into a scrum of men. I was asked questions I could never answer. Spoken to openly about, what to me were still the mysteries of adulthood, sex. I just didn't understand. Always felt so confused and left out of the joke. I disappointed; was disappointed. Looking in the mirror was like looking at a stranger. Once I implored Helen to understand that being a child that was so big only makes the adult want to be small.

There I go off on a tangent. A terrible terrible trait. Well there I go again talking in the

negative. Susan says to me, gently, that I do this and that I'm being harsh on myself, rather I should say something like... I'm not sure how she'd put it, but she would encourage me to be more positive. Susan is a friend of mine who works the fair in the summer months. Only in the summer. From up here I can almost see her caravan. Not quite, I can't lean out far enough. She still remains hidden. It is too early for her to be awake. To be brewing her first coffee in a long succession of coffees.

Since Susan has been a part of the fair she has brought, and I believe I can talk on behalf of the carnies as well as the general public, something fresh and well I don't think I'm going too far to say nurturing. Yes, she definitely has something that in all my years I've never witnessed before. I've had the privilege to form a friendship with her. Which I'm sure I benefit from so much more than she does. Not that Susan would see it that way. No, she is too gracious and generous for that. Instead she would stroke my arm and say, "You're doing it again." But I'm not, there are few things I disagree with Susan about, but this I stand firmly on.

I often chat away the quiet parts of the day with Susan. We've got to know each other well. Or rather she has got to know me well. I talk. She listens. I don't know if I could ever know her. She is beyond my reach. The years have come and gone, seasons, carnivals and each morning during the summer months Susan sets up her van along side my tent. But the anticipation, the dread that tomorrow is the beginning of summer, the time Susan joins us, and she won't be there. Sometimes it's so great that I've had a request from a child to make a giraffe and instead it becomes a question mark or a knotted beast with several heads. I even feel it when I know she will be there, of course she will be there, it is the middle of the season and her van is parked just there and she is asleep in it and of course she is going to rise in the morning, open the shutters and say, "Come in Harry, I'm just brewing some coffee".

It's lucky the security guards know me well and know I'm of good character, otherwise the times that I've grown the most anxious and found myself standing outside her van in the early hours of the morning, they might have thought my intentions were wrong. Instead they say, "Forgot something again Harry", or "Expecting a big day tomorrow", and stroll away. I'd never go in, interrupt her. It's terribly bad to wake someone from their dreams.

Once, maybe more, as a child I stood outside my Mother's bedroom door hoping she was still inside. The sounds had died down; left me alone. I would miss them: the crescendo, then her cry. Some people love to be woken to the sound of the singing of birds, I liked to be awake to them. If I could still hear the breathy voiceless calls then I knew she was still there. When it stopped, the rustling, the murmurs, how could I be sure.

Once I entered her room and whispered "Mum". "She's asleep boy. What, you can't sleep? Me neither, I was just thinking of slipping outside for a cigarette, you're welcome to join me. To sit with me that is." The window was open and if it wasn't for the breeze, the lift and fall of the curtain allowing the street light to enter the room like the sweep of a lighthouse, I wouldn't have even known she was there. The stranger pulled on his boxers, then jeans and t-shirt. It was a warm night, he needn't have bothered with his shoes. In the living room was a mini zoo: balloon animals hung from the ceiling fan, still life danced across the top of the lounge, noses dipped in empty dinner plates and beer bottles, some had tripped, fallen and were left abandoned on the floor. There were two of each type, but they had grown separate, scattered throughout what to them must have been the vastness of the living room. I attempted to pick some of them up, reunite them, but he interrupted me. "What's your name son?" "Harry." "Named after your old man were you?" "I don't know." "Yeah, I think you might have been. Do you like these Harry? You're like your Mum, she loved 'em. I've never had to make so many of them, she had me working Harry, she did."

The veranda railing creaked and shuddered under me. I didn't trust it any more but his sinewy worn body rested easily upon it. With an upright back he lit a cigarette. "I'd offer you one, but you're probably still a little young, only just though. How old are you?" "Eleven." "Jesus, I would of guessed at least 15. You're no small fry are you? Your old man must of been a big bloke. Oh well, good luck to you, you won't be needing to waste your breath blowing and twisting coloured rubber for your keep and comfort, will ya?" Nestled in my cupped hands was one of his giraffes. "Will you teach me to make one like this?" "I'm all out of balloons son.

Used up my store helping your Mum relax. Anyway what if I pass through this town again, I don't want to have ruined my chances, your Mum's got a balloon man at home and is seeking comfort elsewhere." Turning he flicked his cigarette butt across the lawn. It must have at least made it to the footpath. He slid off the railing, went inside and picked up his gear, leaving the balloon animals. "See you, Harry." He shook my hand firmly, like man to man, then walked out onto the road and continued walking.

I gathered up some of the pairs, knowing the house would be spotless when I got up in the morning. I hid them under my bed and out they'd come at night. What was I going to do when they wore out or deflated? They don't last forever, as I said before, the beauty of impermanence. During those sleepless nights I taught myself to make them. Following the twists and knots of the coloured rubber I discovered how it was done, helped along by a book I borrowed from the library. But I did it, without his help. When I showed Mum (I hadn't told her before) she wept. She wept at a lot of things, it was hard to know what kind it was. "Fun aren't they?" "Where did you learn that from?" "A book from the library. Mrs Hickson interbranched it for me. I can make any kind you like. What would make you smile?" "I'm smiling Harry, they're lovely." "You're crying." "No darling, I'm smiling, I promise." It was the early evening, time for her to be back at work. "You can make your own dinner tonight, can you?" "Yeah." I would watch her cross the lawn, turn, and always she'd say half laughing, "Don't forget to go to sleep", wave and enter the barely lit street.

Last night I couldn't sleep so I went back and left a poodle I'd made on Susan's steps. Yesterday a few young men hassled her when I was away having lunch with Helen and Eddie. Susan told me about it later. I don't know what they said or did, she was just quiet all afternoon and when I asked her what was troubling her, she asked me, "Do you think those young blokes think our lives are meaningless?" I didn't want to say yes so I just made us a coffee and dropped some whisky in it. When she took the first sip she laughed and touched my cheek. I thought if I just left the poodle on her step she'd know I'm watching over her. When I moved close to her van I could feel the gentle tremor and hear her birdsong.

Helen and I hadn't made love in, oh, I couldn't tell you how long, but when I crawled into bed beside her she turned to me. Did we both call another's name? I don't know. What I do know, looking down on the cities only permanent fair, is that we wake each day tangled in one another. And though I know the impossibility of forgetting, it feels like from up here, I only need to turn and I could leave it all behind.