

Mylar Loves Company

By Cara Becker

It all started with that half-deflated mylar balloon. It was bobbing there up in the corner of my new guidance counsellor's ramshackle office. In any other circumstances it probably would have been indistinguishable amongst the copious stacks of ill-organized files that were vomited upon every surface in sight. But in this specific circumstance, I was trying desperately to avoid making eye contact with the bitter shell of a man before me. Mr. Campbell was a forty-something sad-sack who wasn't afraid to share the woes of his divorce and reconcile them by hitting on my mom while simultaneously hating her. He was a noodley man with a shrunken face and bubble eyes; it was clear in his slouchy posture and drudging demeanor that he loathed dressing for work and likely blamed the students for greying early.

On our way to the meeting that day, my mom and I had decided that I would do the talking and she would just sit quietly because if one thing had become clear, it was that Mr. Campbell preferred a pretty face rather than an outspoken woman. All the other meetings we had had with him in the process of my transfer had ended in disappointment and difficulty: I "couldn't be squeezed into that class," my physical education credits didn't seem "on par with Steamboat Springs standards," he didn't advise such a "rigorous course load" for a new student. His excuses seemed endless and his half-assed help was always clearly pushing the idea that I didn't belong at Steamboat Springs High School, and I should probably just pack up and head the three hours back to the high school I had come from. Which I might have done if I could, but my mom and I were in it together and her promotion to the Head of the Art Department at the mediocre resort town newspaper meant a transition for us both. My mom's efforts to alleviate some of the difficulties of starting over in the middle of my junior year of high school focused

first and foremost on getting me what I needed from my education, like ensuring my courses were as close to the ones I had been taking the previous semester and assuring the validity of any questionable transfer credits. Mr. Campbell was not a big fan of these efforts and inhibited them with everything he could, building, brick by brick, a wall to keep me out. That's why we made the game plan of silence, because it had become clear in our past meetings that anything my mom said I needed, Mr. Campbell did the opposite. And this time I really needed him to let me do an independent study to keep my AP Psych credits.

So there we were, sitting in the desolation that was his glass-walled, glorified cubicle. My mom and I were being so good. I guess that's how I knew we weren't going to make it, because we have difficulty behaving appropriately in public. And that mylar balloon knew it. That little crinkled basketball balloon was the embodiment of Mr. Campbell, and all it wanted was to share in his woes so they could suffer through their misery together. It started to creep, inching down from the corner of the room towards its owner, one bob at a time until it found a place over Mr. Campbell's shoulder. There it sat, gently caressing the nape of his neck as he tried to create a schedule for me on his computer. Their connection seemed intimate, but was short-lived as Mr. Campbell sent it flying back to the corner of the room with a well-aimed whack.

If only it had stayed there, in its exiled corner, maybe things would have been okay. But that mylar balloon wasn't ready to give up on Mr. Campbell, not just yet. It strategized up there over the cabinet, resting among the papers that were pouring off the edges and geared up for another round. The basketball balloon came drifting down another time, slower than before, more reserved and determined. It stopped just as it had the last time, directly over Mr. Campbell, managing to touch his ear, his neck, and his shoulder all at once with its deformed, concave

roundness. But their time together was again cut short by Mr. Campbell's bitterness as he punched the balloon back to the corner. This time its pain was greater. It hovered lower over the cabinet, pouting and shamed. My mom let out an ill-restrained guffaw that echoed in the hostility of the room. Mr. Campbell glanced over his shoulder at the moping balloon, understanding dawning on him that my mom found its nurturing nature funny.

"Guess the balloon knows I'm lonely... Guess I'll have to take *it* out on Friday night, since you're not free." His desultory tone was hemmed in malice. My mom's repeated rejection of his poorly constructed attempts at asking her out clearly hadn't had a "once bitten, twice shy" effect. She reeled her chuckle back in and he returned to typing.

If this could have been the end for the mylar balloon, maybe I would have gotten those AP credits. But its steady recovery and unfailing love for Mr. Campbell is what broke my mom. I knew she had seen its rejected journey just as I had, and as that tinfoil bubble lifted itself off the cabinet to come for Mr. Campbell once again with its amiable intentions, I knew she wouldn't be able to restrain much longer. Her lips were taut and quivering, trying to hide the fact that she was wavering in her promise to uphold the silence and she was desperately avoiding eye contact with that lonely little balloon. But as it settled once more in his neck nook, before he could deny its love another time, she said the two words that ruined it all.

"It's lurking."

The hysterical laughter that came over us after that comment was akin only to the kind of laughter that comes over you in church, where every patron's look and every holy reminder that your behavior is frowned upon only fuels the insatiable need to laugh your ass off. Every second that ticked by increased Mr. Campbell's anger and embarrassment at his stupid balloon and brought on another eruption of laughter from me and my mom. He stared at us with boredom

and disgust, ashamed at the joke the balloon had made of him. We were sitting with naught but a plastic desk between us and the man who would decide my future at Steamboat Springs High School, and we were uncontrollably laughing in his face. After a couple of minutes the hilarity would quell until we would accidentally make eye contact with the misshapen basketball sulking in the corner and the breathless laughter would overcome us once more.

Near the end my mom had literally placed her entire head into her purse in the hopes of being able to stop if she kept herself from looking at me. I was crushing my palms into my eyes in an attempt to hinder the floodgate of tears that had opened up while simultaneously wiping the drool off my chin because the laughter continuously bubbling up through my throat was keeping me from even being able to close my mouth. That was it for Mr. Campbell, he did not think it was funny. He stood up from his desk and began to exit the room. That would have been a sobering fact, except that fucking mylar balloon stood with him in solidarity. It followed him from the corner of the room right on up to the door, snootily ignoring us, just as he was. Then Mr. Campbell felt its presence and snapped his head around to glare at the object that had led to his disgrace. And right there in the middle of the room, beneath the glare of Mr. Campbell's hatred, the little basketball sank slowly to the ground.

That did my mom and me in. We knew, looking at that sad mylar balloon wilted on the floor, that our laughter would not stop. We knew that the animation of that inanimate object had cost us my AP Psych course and that there was nothing left for us to do but walk out of that office with our mascara-run faces and our drool stained shirts and own our laughter. While that balloon set a standard for the way Mr. Campbell would deal with me for the rest of my time in Steamboat, it also brought my mom and me laughter at a time when there wasn't much humor on the horizon.