

# Balloon

Her name is Sophia and also *Come here* and *Quiet* and *Bring me one*. It is the time of summer when there is heat lightning in the distance but no rain, a little flash that barely makes a sound but seems to watch from the far horizon, beyond the soybean fields. Often, first thing out of bed, Sophia stands at her window and gazes at the flatness of the land and at the gray light and at the stillness of the road. The road usually says *Nothing* or *I am a held breath*. Later it will collect the day's heat and hold it so it hurts her feet if she walks on it. Dust will rise from its body. Sophia is nine. She counts the numbers on her fingers. When late August at last arrives, the bus will stop in front of her house again and wait with its yellow eye. She will climb aboard and feel the gravity of everyone turning in her direction. Their attention will lock on, saying *You don't have a mother anymore* or *Don't sit by me*.

Ketchup lies at Sophia's feet, her chin on her paws. She is part German shepherd, part retriever. She watches Sophia at the window. She has a pink tongue that droops out of the side of her mouth in summer weather. She is all black except for a few white markings on her paws and chest. Ketchup sleeps each night in Sophia's bed and puts her ears up on those rare occasions when a car or truck whooshes past on the road. The dog was found by Sophia's mother, half-starved by the creek behind the house, gnawing on a plastic ketchup bottle. You could see her ribs. Her fur was matted and dirty. Now Sophia brushes Ketchup's fur each day with the same brush she uses on her own hair. This is the universe of everything.

Now, bracing herself, Sophia climbs down the stairs to the kitchen. Her father looks up from where he is sitting with a bowl of cereal. He is shirtless. His skin is dark on his shoulders and neck and arms, but his chest is pale as a grub. He affixes her with his eyes and points at Ketchup. He says, "Don't forget about tonight. No reminders. I'm not playing around."

"Okay," Sophia says.

The creek today is a living thing. Sophia walks along its edge, Ketchup running beside her. Her father has left for work. The creek hides down its narrow trench, past a curtain of tall grass. The water winds this way and that. These days it is barely a trickle, a little gurgle. Sometimes, in certain moods, Sophia imagines that it is whispering a secret message that only she can understand. And what does it say? It announces that there are eyes behind the clouds or that the clouds are ears pointing at the land, listening. Or maybe it is Sophia's mother who is listening from so high up.

Sophia sits in the grass and studies the water as it slips by. She rubs Ketchup behind her ears. One of her earliest memories is of a leaf floating in the muddy waters. It was a raft. Sophia imagines that it was off on a journey, an adventure. But to where? What dreams might a leaf have? Her mother is there in the memory as well. She is saying they should race leaves, and so they do. And what sound does a leaf make in the water as it slips past? It says *Silence* or *Soon I'll be out of sight* or *Goodbye*. Why Sophia remembers this day with the leaves she cannot say. A leaf is a kind of love, she thinks, something that belongs just to you. "Look at that," her mother is saying in the memory. "Look at how fast they are going."

Sophia feels the day stretching outward. It doesn't want to end. She sits cross-legged in the grass in the backyard, throwing a green tennis ball for Ketchup. The dog races after the ball and chomps it in her mouth. It is wet when she hands it back. Sophia throws it again, and there is something about the arc that seems like a kind of vision or prayer. First it goes up, alive and free, and then it comes back down. And Sophia, as she watches the dog running, feels herself becoming almost invisible. She is slipping away from the world. Maybe Ketchup will turn around with the ball in her mouth and be stunned. No one will be sitting there. Sophia thinks this while a bee is hovering above the clover beside her knee. The little white flower is a kind of forever. It lives in the grass that lives in the yard. It disappears each year but then comes back. It is somehow more real than anything.

Later she turns on the sprinkler and watches it turning one way then the next. This is how the day goes. She runs through the sprinkler and Ketchup, at a safe distance, barks.

It was a little pop in the brain. Sophia is remembering this while lying in her bed. The sheet over her face. She is statuary. The game is hide-and-seek. She told Ketchup to stay in the hallway then she herself came in the room to hide. Then she called out. Now she hears Ketchup sniffing at the side of the bed. But what Sophia is imagining is a balloon you blow too hard. It swells and swells then suddenly there's a loud noise. She tries to picture it, but at once Ketchup is jumping on the bed. Sophia removes the sheet and throws her arms around the dog's neck. "Here I am," she says. But she is still thinking about that balloon popping in her mother's head while she was at work.

Later she goes down the stairs to make ham sandwiches. There is one for her and one for Ketchup. They eat on the back stoop. Her thoughts grow jumbled as she is chewing. She has always liked the dead heads of dandelions. How they are carried off in a wind. How they are old in their white hair. And if you blow on the flowers, they come apart. She thinks: *My mother's brain was a white flower. Someone blew on it.* Then her mother was hidden beneath a mound of dirt. Sophia pictures herself standing there beside her father at the cemetery. Her father is gripping her hand too hard. It hurts.

There are names for days that keep going and going: *The sun is too hot* or *Running my fingers through my mother's dresses* or *Filling Ketchup's water bowl* or *Here are my dolls* or *Watching cartoons*. Sophia's name as the day persists is *I'm not really here* or *My mother is the sound of the birds in the trees* or *The tall grass is talking* or *My father will be mad if I don't chain her*.

Sophia is standing in the backyard. She's looking at how the long leash is attached to a metal stake in the ground. There is a hook she is supposed to connect to Ketchup's collar. She tries it then steps away. Ketchup strains at the length of it, desperate to follow. Ketchup barks. And the bark says *Let me come with you*. Sophia lets the dog free and they walk together up to the front of the house and the road. She squints in both directions, and what does she see? Straightness. Emptiness. Glaring sunlight. The soybean field across the road seems to rustle like water in the wind. It is muttering a small sound.

A half hour later, Sophia pulls a plastic box from under the bed that once belonged to both her parents. It is her father's bed now. She removes a bright red ribbon and a bow for wrapping gifts. She affixes the bow to Ketchup's head with the ribbon. Ketchup holds still at first, but then she tilts her head downward and tries to remove it with a paw.

"You look beautiful," Sophia says.

Soon she is naming the afternoon *Flipping through the pages of a book* and *Seeing how long I can hold my breath* and *Watching Ketchup watch a squirrel on a limb out the window*.

Her father is home. He says, "Bring me a beer. Leave it outside the bathroom door." Later, when he's out of the shower, he says, "Is it done...she's out on her chain?" Later, when his wet hair is slicked back, he says, "Put something nicer on." After that he says, "I'm picking up the pizza. If she shows up before I get back, let her in. Got it?" Finally, when he's holding the keys to his truck, he says, "You be nice to her...hear me? You don't want to find out what happens otherwise."

Sophia nods. Her head has learned to bob at the appropriate moments. Her father doesn't look at her while he talks. He speaks to the air or his hands or the world outside the windows. Once he told her, "I didn't sign up for being a parent by myself. That's not how it works."

Then he is gone from the house. Sophia stands at the picture window at the back of the living room. The lawn grass is browning with summer. The trees at the yard's edge are motionless. The clouds are pale white scars above them. The creek is invisible. And Ketchup is pacing, testing and testing the length of the tether, which yanks her suddenly if she ventures too far. She is trying to get back into the house, trying to get back to Sophia. Finally she lies down and remains there like a ghost.

Sophia slips out the back door and hugs her.

The woman's name is Betsy and *Her father's new girlfriend* and *Allergic to dogs* and *Not my mother*. She is sitting at the dining room table. She looks like Mrs. Greene, who Sophia had in kindergarten. It's the red hair and freckles. It's the way she leans too close to you when she talks.

"Your father says you do very well in school," she says.

"I guess," Sophia says.

"You must be very smart," the woman says.

Sophia shrugs.

"Is school your favorite?" the woman asks.

"No," Sophia says.

"Oh. You don't like school?"

"No," Sophia says.

"It's boring? I know I felt that way."

"No, I like learning."

"Then what?" the woman asks.

"Everyone looks at you."

"That's bad?" the woman asks.

Ketchup is barking from outside as they talk. The sound burrows deep down into Sophia's ear. The sound says *Please, please*. Sophia, meanwhile, is studying the flowers on the woman's dress. They are little pink flowers. They are so small you almost have to squint to see them, and even then they hardly exist.

"Is that barking bothering you?" her father suddenly asks the woman. The sound of his voice is a shudder. It moves up and down Sophia's ribs. It tickles over her skin. She looks up, stiffening in place.

"It's fine," the woman says.

"You don't like dogs?" Sophia blurts.

The woman has just taken a bite of pizza, so chews. She dabs a napkin across her mouth. She says, "It's not that, Honey. They make me sneeze and my eyes water. It's always been like that. I like them from afar."

There is a gap in her two front teeth as she smiles. Sophia can see the pink little creature of her tongue.

"I explained this already," her father says.

"What if she doesn't get close?" Sophia says.

"I'm sorry, Sweetie."

"Be polite," her father warns.

"Oh, she's fine," the woman says. "Just look at her. She's darling. You didn't tell me your daughter was so delightful."

"Can't you shut her up?" her father asks.

"What's her name?" the woman asks.

Sophia says, "Ketchup."

"Really?" the woman asks.

"Shut that dog up," her father says. "Move her farther from the house."

"My mother found her eating ketchup," Sophia says.

"That's about enough," her father says.

"I'm so sorry about your mother," the woman says.

Sophia says *Nothing*. She says *Silence*.

The woman says, "Your dad told me it's been fourteen months now. Is that right? How hard it must be for both of you. You're so brave."

"Do you want another beer?" her father asks.

"I don't mind if I do," the woman says.

Sophia's father gives her the look. Up she jumps. She sees Ketchup out the window. She is facing the house. She seems to twitch a little with each bark.

"I hope to be over here a lot more now," the woman says when Sophia hands her the bottle. "But don't think I'm trying to be a replacement, Honey. I know better."

"My name is Sophia," Sophia says.

"Don't get mouthy," her father says.

"She's fine," the woman says.

"How often?" Sophia asks.

"Oh, I don't know."

"What about Ketchup?" Sophia asks.

Her father rises from his chair. The wind of the slap arrives at the same instant as the pain. His eyes are like falling off a cliff.

"Go out there and shut your dog up," he says. "Do you hear me? Or do you want me to drop her off at the pound tomorrow? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh, it's fine, Honey, really," she is saying.

And Sophie is thinking: *His name isn't Honey either. And She's the devil.*

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She walks Ketchup by the creek. The water looks lonesome in its thin line. It barely has the strength to go on. She has a theory that mosquitoes can't find you if you hold your breath and stand so still you aren't actually there. She closes her eyes at one point and aims her face toward the sun, which is dipping down behind the trees. When she opens her eyes, Ketchup is looking at her. Each time she glances at her dog, the tail begins to wag. She thinks of what it's like in school when you move down the hallways. She keeps her eyes on her shoes and hugs close to the walls. And she thinks of the balloon in her mother's head. And she thinks of walking out beyond the creek, into the trees, walking until she reaches the cemetery where her mother is resting beneath the dirt. But she doesn't actually know which way she would have to walk to get there. She imagines her mother lying in the ground and dreaming of the moon and the stars she can't see. She must dream that the moon is a moth, and the stars are white bees. She must dream of her daughter and of Ketchup, and maybe she whispers beneath the ground. And what does she say? *There you are. I see you. There you both are. I see you. I see you.*

Her father is a frown. His whole face swivels into it. He leans over the bed and pulls the sheet up to her chin.

He says, "You have to be nicer to her."

His breath is beer. He says, "People matter more than dogs. Do you understand me?"

He says, "You need a woman in your life. There are things I don't know."

He says, "Don't embarrass me again."

He says, "This doesn't mean I'm forgetting your mother."

He says, "Go to sleep."

He says, "That damn dog better not start barking again."

He says, "Dogs belong outside anyway. I've given you too much slack. Because you know why."

He says, "No more sleeping in your bed."

He says, "Behave now."

And so she clamps shut her eyes when he is gone. This is what sleep is. You clamp shut your eyes and wait for it to come. She thinks of it, sometimes, as like a balloon deflating. The air goes out of it and then you sleep. But she keeps hearing, now, voices in the wall. They slosh like suds. It is her father and her in the next room. Her name is *High scratchy voice* and *Frilly giggle*. Sophia knows they are in her mother's bedroom. They are talking. They are soapsuds. Sophia imagines that she can slip inside those soapsuds and fall asleep, but it doesn't happen. Then—later—the voices are finally gone from the bedroom. She hears them, instead, from the living room. The television is on. She reaches for Ketchup

in the bed but Ketchup isn't there. She hugs her pillow to her chest and pretends it is Ketchup. And the fury she feels in her body is a blossom. It is a sudden flower. It is perfect in its shape.

And she imagines that Ketchup's name is *I am lonely in the yard* and *It's so dark out here* and *I miss Sophia* and *What did I do to deserve this?*

Barking. Sophia sits up in bed. Night falls through her window. Night dresses the sky beyond her curtains. Barking. Her bare feet are on the floorboards. Barking. The sounds of insects fill the space between the barks. She sneaks out from her bedroom and climbs down the stairs. She cups her hands around her eyes to look out. Barking. But she can't see Ketchup anywhere. Barking. Soon, Sophia knows, her father's voice will be a trumpet. It will sound in the house. So she rushes back to her bedroom and drags her comforter from the bed. She drags it behind her down the stairs. She drags it out the kitchen door and into the backyard. Barking. She feels the prickles of the grass against her feet. She feels the coolness of the air. The black of her dog is invisible in the black of the night. The dog isn't really there. She's become a ghost. Barking. Then Ketchup is rushing up against her, pressing against her. Ketchup wriggles and licks and can't hold still. This is everything. This is even more than the stars that are hiding tonight behind the clouds, more than the moon impaled amid the distant trees. Sophia spreads the comforter and lies down. For a time—a long time—Ketchup is too excited to lie down, too, but finally she does. Ketchup releases a big sigh. She rolls on her back to have her belly rubbed. If it were light out you could see that it was pink. But now there is just the thump of the tail, even while she's on her back. And Sophia closes her eyes and waits for the universe to blink out all around them.