
The
Orange
Balloon
A short story
NICKELBACK
T-SHIRTS!
HOT

The Orange Balloon wanted an adventure.
Not the kind with maps.
Not the kind with helmets.
The kind where you see a puddle and think:
I can make that jump.
So the Orange Balloon topped off his helium.
With an extra shot of espresso.
Then he floated into town.
The morning looked normal.
Which was usually where trouble made its first mistake.
The Orange Balloon drifted past a bakery.
Past a bus stop.
Past a man carrying too many flowers.
Then he spotted something on the sidewalk.
A shiny button.
The kind that looked like it had been on quite a journey.
The Orange Balloon lowered himself.
The button sparkled.
"Ooh."
He picked it up with his string.
The button swung beneath him as he floated down the sidewalk.
It looked important.
Or at least shiny.
Which was close enough.
Then the button slipped.
It bounced once.
Twice.
Then rolled behind a crooked sign.
The Orange Balloon froze.

The sign leaned over a stack of boxes.
Not a little.
A lot.
The Orange Balloon reached behind it.
Slowly.
Carefully.
Dramatically.
The sign wobbled.
The boxes trembled.
A pigeon stepped away.
The Orange Balloon stretched his string farther.
The button was right there.
Almost.
Almost.
Got it.
The Orange Balloon pulled the button free.
The sign stopped wobbling.
The boxes stayed in place.
The pigeon returned.
The Orange Balloon floated back and admired his work.
Then he noticed the sign.
It was still crooked.
That would not do.
He nudged it.
Just a little.
The sign straightened.
"Ooh. Perfect."
The Orange Balloon floated away proudly.
Behind him, the sign had stopped leaning on the boxes.

The boxes noticed immediately.
The first box tipped.
Then the second.
Then the third.
The fourth box tried to be strong.
It was not.
The boxes slid into a bucket.
The bucket rolled into a bicycle.
The bicycle rolled into a street performer.
The street performer was juggling.
Bad timing for him.
Great timing for everyone else.
The bicycle bumped his leg.
The street performer spun.
One juggling pin flew left.
One flew right.
One went straight up.
His hat flew off.
The crowd gasped.
The Orange Balloon kept floating down the sidewalk.
The street performer stumbled backward.
Caught one pin.
Caught the second.
Caught the third.
Then his hat landed perfectly on his head.
The crowd exploded.
The street performer blinked.
Then bowed.
The Orange Balloon heard the applause behind him.

He turned around.
The crowd was cheering.
The street performer was bowing.
The Orange Balloon looked at his shiny button.
Then looked at the crowd.
Then nodded.
The button was clearly lucky.
A man near the fountain clapped too hard.
He dropped his sandwich.
A dog noticed.
The dog charged.
The man charged after the dog.
The dog ran around the fountain.
The man ran around the fountain.
The dog jumped left.
The man jumped left.
The dog jumped right.
The man jumped right.
The dog stopped.
The man did not.
Splash.
The fountain accepted him immediately.
The crowd cheered even louder.
The street performer bowed again.
The wet man sat in the fountain holding half a sandwich.
The dog sat beside him holding the other half.
Both seemed disappointed for different reasons.
The Orange Balloon watched from down the street.
More applause.

More cheering.

More chaos.

He looked at the shiny button again.

Very lucky.

The Orange Balloon continued down the sidewalk.

The town felt exciting.

A little loud.

But exciting.

A vendor stood beside a folding table covered in shirts.

He raised both hands and shouted.

"$5 Nickelback t-shirts!"

A teenager stopped walking.

"Nickelback is still a thing?"

The Orange Balloon floated past them.

The shiny button swung beneath him.

Then the Orange Balloon smiled in whatever way balloons could smile if they had a

face.

He looked down at the button.

There was a little scratch across the middle.

A bit of dust near the edge.

The Orange Balloon rubbed it gently with his string.

The dust came off.

The scratch stayed.

This button had definitely been on a journey.

Then he smelled something.

Warm.

Salty.

Important.

The Orange Balloon stopped floating.

Across the street sat a pretzel stand.

Not just any pretzel stand.

A good one.

The kind where the pretzels looked soft enough to make people forgive small

problems.

The Orange Balloon drifted closer.

A fresh pretzel sat on the counter.

Golden.

Twisted.

Perfect.

The Orange Balloon reached for it.

Then paused.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

The Orange Balloon stared at the empty container.

The one that was supposed to be full of cheese.

The worker looked at the container.

Then at the Orange Balloon.

Then back at the container.

"Give me one second."

A bird landed on the counter.

The bird looked at the pretzel.

The Orange Balloon looked at the bird.

The bird looked back at the pretzel.

That was concerning.

The bird moved first.

It grabbed the pretzel and flapped away.

The Orange Balloon shot after it.
The cheese would have to wait.
This had become a different emergency.
The bird flew down the sidewalk.
The Orange Balloon followed.
Past the Nickelback shirts.
Past the fountain.
Past the street performer.
The street performer was still bowing.
The crowd was still cheering.
The Orange Balloon did not have time to be impressed.
The bird turned left.
The Orange Balloon turned left.
The bird dipped under a flower arch.
The Orange Balloon dipped under the flower arch.
A woman in a white dress turned around.
A man in a suit turned around.
A hundred people in nice clothes turned around.
The Orange Balloon stopped.
The bird landed on a table near the front.
The pretzel dropped.
The Orange Balloon floated toward it.
Slowly.
Carefully.
Like Captain Jack Sparrow sneaking up on a one-eyed rabbit.
The pretzel was right there.
Still warm.
Still twisted.
Still worth fighting for.

The Orange Balloon reached down with his string.
Almost.
Almost.
Got it.
The Orange Balloon lifted the pretzel.
The bird disagreed.
It swooped down again.
The Orange Balloon pulled left.
The bird pulled right.
The pretzel stretched.
The woman in the white dress gasped.
The man in the suit gasped too.
Mostly because she did.
The Orange Balloon tugged once more.
The bird let go.
The pretzel snapped back.
The Orange Balloon spun backward.
His string flicked a napkin.
The napkin lifted.
Floated.
Twisted.
Then landed gently against a candle.
For one second, nothing happened.
Then the corner of the napkin caught fire.
The flame rose.
The whole wedding seemed to disappear.
The flowers disappeared.
The chairs disappeared.
The cake disappeared.

There was only the fire.

The terrible fire.

The dangerous fire.

The wedding-ending fire.

The kind of fire people would talk about for years.

The kind of fire that would ruin the pictures.

The kind of fire that would make someone's aunt say, "I told them not to use real

candles."

Then a waiter stepped forward.

He tipped a glass.

One small drop of water fell.

Psst.

The fire went out.

The wedding came back.

The flowers were fine.

The chairs were fine.

The cake was fine.

The napkin had one tiny black corner.

The waiter looked at the woman in the white dress.

"Would you like some more water, ma'am?"

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