

Balloon Time

J a k e T i l l i s

Birth of the Balloon

There were only two things for certain.

1. Charlie died and turned into a balloon.

2. He and Frankie were supposed to watch the film *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*—later that evening.

But before we get into it, let's just address the balloon thing. Yes, he really died and turned into a balloon. No, it's not a metaphor—if by the end of it all you're thinking the balloon was a symbol for childlike innocence or something, you probably believe in love at first sight, and that your dog really was sent off to a farm. I don't know if everybody dies and turns into a balloon, or a microwave, or a rusty spoon—probably not. His name was Charlie, he died, he turned into a balloon. (Refer to number one of the list of certainties.)

The balloon was with the body, in the bedroom, caught between the window and the half opened blinds. It was an unremarkable balloon, in the sense that for a balloon that had just been a person, it looked a bit plain. As a “regular balloon” goes (a balloon which has never been a person)—no complaints. It was a yellow balloon with a white string—not much more you could ask for.

Naturally, or not, the balloon had a few questions racing through it—‘Why am I a balloon?’ ‘How did I die?’ ‘Why am I a yellow balloon?’ ‘What about Frankie and Darla?’ ‘Does everybody die and turn into a balloon?’ ‘Am I thinking these things or speaking them?’

“Am I a fucking balloon?” The balloon asked this one out loud, although without a mouth, it was more of a feeling that made this the case rather than any tangible change. It's a weird feeling, to speak to yourself, making promises without a mouth, but you agree there's a distinction between thought and voice without sound. Not that this really makes sense, but then again, a balloon said it.

Interestingly, Charlie had died in the middle of the room, three feet away from the window—the same place the balloon was born. Had a Lasko oscillating tower fan not been blowing air through that

side of the room, the balloon would have floated straight up, and into the razor sharp blades of the ceiling fan above. Had this been the case, we would have referred to this incident as **Birth and Death of the Balloon**—but due to the downward airflow from the ceiling fan combined with the sideways momentum gained from the Lasko tower, the balloon floated up toward the wall, safely burrowing itself between the window and the blinds.

Normally, that Lasko fan is stored in the hallway closet at this time in November—but due to one of those inexplicable heat waves the San Fernando Valley seems to get every once in a while, the fan was taken out of storage and placed into the bedroom, earlier that morning. Call it fate, call it karma, call it global warming, but that, to me, is far stranger than Charlie dying and turning into a balloon.

In that same moment, 31 years earlier, Hobbes Dolly signs the last document in his contract for his first leading role in a Hollywood movie... Actually, we'll hold off on that for a bit.

And hopefully, it'll all make sense in the end.

Cows and Chicken

“Forty cows, twenty-eight chicken, how many didn’t?”

“That’s an improper question.”

“No it’s not—it’s a riddle,” Frankie explained. She continued, “Forty cows, twenty-eight chicken, how many didn’t?”

Charlie took another sip of his coffee, he was holding the mug in one hand and driving with the other. Frankie didn’t like it when he did this because she thought it was distracted driving—but at 6:30 AM on a Saturday, there is only distracted driving.

“Well, I don’t know. I can’t think of anything,” Charlie replied after a few moments of loose thought. He was a little pissed to be outwitted by an eight-year-old, but that sort of jealousy was so suppressed in him that he thought he was just hungry.

“Well think better!” Frankie insisted.

“You mean think harder?” Charlie challenged, chuckling at the simplicity of such an unbearably tall order. But for a quick moment,

Charlie thought about what life for him would look like if he were able to think better. Nothing specific came to mind, but ideas like “abundance” and “mountainous” were in the running.

“No, thinking harder won’t do anything, you have to think better.” Frankie explained.

The genius of it.

We Don’t Do That Around Here

“Ok Sculptor, your time freezing people is over. I’m gonna chop you up into little pieces, and feed them to my dog Justice. Cuz this is America, buddy... And... God damn it what’s the line?”

“And we don’t do that around here.”

Hobbes thought that over for a second. “And we don’t do that around here? Are you fuckin kidding me—that’s the best you could do? And we don’t *do* that around here?”

“Alright let’s take five, camera back to one,” Bud blew into the megaphone. The various crewmembers scurried around resetting the stage, and Hobbes took out a cigarette and lit it, just as Avi rushed over to calm him down.

“Hobbes, Hobbes, look I know you may not agr—”

“I went to film school Dave, I’m a classically trained fuckin actor, and you have me saying shit like ‘And that’s not what we do around here’—fuckin bullshit man,” Hobbes interrupted.

“We all went to film school, Hobbes.”

“Bull-fuckin-shit we all went to film school.”

Hobbes is a little stressed out—he’s got a lot riding on this film. It’s the spiritual sister film to both *American Ninja* (1985), and *American Ninja II: The Confrontation* (1987), each directed by Sam Firstenberg—as well as his feature debut as a leading man. And it’s 1988 now, CDs are just starting to outsell vinyls, John F. Kennedy Jr. is People’s Magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive,” and *American Ninja III: Blood Hunt* is in post-production—helmed by a new director and leading man, due to creative differences between Firstenberg and the studio. Firestenberg, now working on his current project

Riverbend, recruits Avi to produce *Mississippi Ninja*, with a new director, and a new leading man the world has never seen before—Hobbes Dolly. So Hobbes has a lot at stake here. His own career, and the legacy of Firstenberg’s *American Ninja* franchise.

Darla’s Memories

Frankie put her Minions backpack in the empty cubby, gripping the string of the balloon in her right hand. The bag had a yellow one-eyed monster holding a banana to its ear. Underneath it, in big yellow letters, spelled “BELLOW?” When Darla first bought her the backpack, Frankie showed it to Charlie—who saw it, then immediately tied a rope to the fan in the kitchen, and hung himself. (But really, he said, “Cool backpack!”)

Darla was near the front door, talking to Frankie’s third grade teacher Carlos, who had generously offered to come in to school an hour early, to accommodate Darla’s new job. Since Charlie’s death three weeks earlier, she’d been forced to take a job as a receptionist at the warehouse of the water delivery service Aquaquench—an unfulfilling nightmare of a job, but she did get a lot of free water out of it. Prior to Charlie’s passing, she worked as a freelance real estate photographer, though as the cameras in cell phones had become higher quality, she found herself getting less and less work over the past couple years. That job hadn’t made her heart swell like a fiddle either, but it beat working for a company whose slogan is “When did water get so easy?”

“You know, you’ve got a really special girl here—Frankie’s always surprising me with the things she comes up with in class!” Carlos said, not really knowing what to say in these sorts of situations.

This simultaneously threw three separate memories into Darla’s head.

1. The time Darla and Frankie were sitting at the kitchen table. Darla was doing the New York Times daily crossword on her phone, while Frankie worked on her multiplication tables. Then Frankie asked her, “I think it’s important that I know more about the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Could you give me some context?"

2. The time Darla asked the waitress for a Diet Coke, and Frankie asked her, "Are you trying to fool us, or yourself?"

3. The time Darla let Frankie use her laptop to watch a show on Netflix. Frankie came back a few minutes later with a picture of a painting pulled up on it. Frankie asked Darla if she liked the painting, to which Darla told her that she did, and that she loved the colors. Frankie exclaimed, "Hitler drew it!" (Later that evening, Darla asked Frankie to show Charlie what she had shown her. Once Frankie had told him that Hitler drew it, Charlie joked that the painting had been Hitler's second greatest accomplishment. Darla had a talk with him later that night about what not to say in front of eight-year-olds.)

"Yes, very special girl this one."

The Flux-Capacitor

It wasn't the fact the pipe was completely disconnected from the drain that caused Charlie's mind to spiral—it was the toenail sitting underneath it which did that. And let me be clear, this wasn't the tip of the toenail you get when you cut your nails—this was a complete, unaltered, museum quality toenail, lying on the floor of the kitchen sink. Charlie had just fixed the same sink three days earlier, but now he's faced with a disconnected pipe, and a toenail painted midnight blue. Frankie sat on a chair he'd pulled up for her, while the homeowner, Sophia, sat on her bed in the bedroom across the hall, and brushed her hair—thinking about how it was a great decision dying it a "chestnut brown" after all, and fucking the plumber.

"Are we watching a movie tonight?" Frankie asked, although she knew very well that they would be. She had grown fond of watching movies with Charlie, most of which were probably too violent for Frankie to be exposed to at such a young age. Luckily for her, Charlie loved action movies, and watching action movies with Frankie was Charlie's favorite thing in the world. They called them "Peanuts and Pop Night," where Charlie would go to the liquor store, grab two one-liter bottles of soda, a big bag of peanuts, and go home and put on

an action movie. They had special mugs for the soda, and a special bowl for the peanuts, all of which were western themed—though they never watched westerns.

The question snapped Charlie out of his spiraling mind, and he assured that they would in fact be watching a movie later that night—*Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*. This would not be Charlie's first viewing of the film—in fact, he had watched it a week earlier, while Frankie was at school, then immediately rewatched it with commentary provided by the director, John 'Bud' Cardos, producer, Avi Lerner, and star, Hobbes Dolly. He did this from time to time, in order to throw some interesting facts at Frankie while they watched a film.

"What's that about?"

"Well, it's about this guy in Mississippi—he's a ninja—he needs to find and put an end to The Sculptor's terror—a failed artist who turns mad and starts freezing people into works of art," Charlie explained.

"Ooh, clashing ideologies, my favorite," Frankie replied, almost devilishly. "How does he unfreeze them?"

And to that, Charlie insisted that she'd just have to wait and see, but asked if she wanted to see something gross, and pulled out the bloody toenail, just as Sophia made her way over to check on the two of them. Frankie let out a scream, Charlie chuckled, and Sophia said, "Oh my god!" Charlie looked over at Sophia's foot, and in her high heels he saw five toes—four of them painted midnight blue, and one of them wrapped in white bandage, stained a bit red from seeping blood.

Charlie offered Sophia the toenail and asked, "This yours?"

Sophia claimed she had no idea how that would have gotten there, and insisted she must have, for some reason, discarded the toenail in the kitchen sink instead of the trashcan, after she had lost the nail when accidentally clipping a piece of furniture.

"That doesn't make any sense," Frankie objected.

"Sure it does Frank... So Sophia, in terms of the sink, what it looks like is that your capacitor went bad for the flux-gauge, but luckily I

had a spare on me. They're about ten bucks, if you could reimburse that on top of my services that'd be great, but if you don't got it on you, then don't worry about it."

"Her what went bad for the what? You two aren't making any sense," Frankie objected again, having gone on too many jobs with Charlie to let something like that slide.

Still, Sophia gave him the ten bucks, and embarrassed, apologized for the inconvenience. So Charlie finished sealing up the pipe, they all shook hands, and besides the toenail, it was all business as usual.

"Why'd that lady give you ten dollars?" Frankie finally asked, as they drove away.

Charlie chuckled, "Cuz I told her that her flux-capacitor went bad."

Frankie gave him a blank look.

"You know sometimes I forget how young you are—it's from the movie *Back to the Future*."

"What's that about?"

"Well, it's about a guy, who goes to the past, and now he needs to get back to the future."

"How'd he get to the past?"

"The flux-capacitor!"

Frankie let it all sink in.

"And you just gave it away?!"

Charlie erupted into laughter, and explained that the flux-capacitor is not a real thing, although it would be awesome.

"But why'd you tell her that?" Frankie asked, still trying to wrap her eight-year-old head around the toenail, the flux-capacitor, and now the ten dollars—the whole situation still beyond her already outsized world of knowledge.

"You just gotta be patient and find out," Charlie persisted.

"I don't wanna be patient."

"No one wants to be patient sweetheart—but sometimes, you gotta be it."

Hair and Makeup

Hobbes Dolly sat in his trailer and stared at himself in the mirror, as Julie, the makeup artist, applied his makeup. On set, 50 feet away, they were shooting his final confrontation with *The Sculptor*—but with so many stunts and flips he couldn't do himself, he was barely in the thing at all. He pulled out another cigarette and went over the last line in the film, with as much conviction as he could gather.

"I guess you forgot the one rule of art, Sculptor... Don't —Jesus Christ this is stupid. That's stupid right?"

"Hey I'm just the makeup artist, I'm just here to make sure you look good saying it."

"Yeah, you always do Julie," Hobbes agreed. He spotted a ring on her finger through the mirror.

"You're married?"

"Engaged. Never noticed the ring?"

"All the pretty ones are... Suppose this film's a hit though, and I'm a big star—"

"Then I'll see you in the movies, Hobbes," Julie replied, shutting down that impossible reality as quickly and efficiently as possible, as she finished his makeup. "All done."

Hobbes stood up and took a last drag of his cigarette. It was impossible for him to know that *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge* would not be a hit, nor would he become a big star. He couldn't know that the film would be pulled from theaters, but gain status as a cult classic for the cheesy premise, writing, acting, and poor direction. Because as much as he knew the script was shit and the costumes were cheesy—there was still a chance.

"I guess you forgot the one rule of art, Sculptor... Don't fuck with a ninja."

The Incident of the Three Black Shoes

Darla had just dropped Frankie off when she received a call from her boss, Toby from Aquaquench.

“The whole place is flooded, it’s gonna take at least a few days to get the place up and running again,” Toby explained.

“Did a truck leak?” Darla asked.

“No Darla, it started raining inside,” Toby replied sarcastically, to which Darla flipped off her phone and mouthed, “Fuck you.”

“Well,” Darla said, “At least the floor will be clean at the end of it all.”

“I’m not really sure why you would say that. Anyway, take the few days off and I’ll let you know when I have more information. I’ll be in contact.”

Now Darla had the rest of the day to do—well, absolutely nothing. She did need gas though, so she stopped by the 76 near the apartment, to fill up her tank.

“Can I put twenty in number three?” Darla asked the 76 cashier. He took her money and began to ring her up, as Darla looked around at all the snacks and drinks sitting on the shelves, before a scratcher lottery ticket with rows of four-leaf clovers, and a leprechaun hugging a pot of gold on it, caught her eye. In her head, she said, “Fuck it.”

“Yeah and I’ll take this scratcher too, the one with the leprechaun on it.”

“One buck.”

Darla took out a buck and handed it to the cashier, then pulled a penny out from her pocket and started scratching. She needed three rainbows, but only got two, and the rest gold bars. No dice.

“I’ll get another one.”

“One buck.”

Darla took out another dollar and handed it over to the cashier, “I’m pretty sure you can’t lose at these things twice in a row, right?”

The cashier smiled at her and handed her another leprechaun scratcher, and she scratched away. This time she needed three green hats, but she got two green hats, a rainbow, and the rest gold bars. No dice.

“One more,” Darla told him, taking out another dollar.

The cashier chuckled, “I don’t wanna take all your money lady, but I will.” He handed her another leprechaun scratcher, and she had at it. Now this time, she needed three black shoes—and she got the three black shoes, along with two hats, and the rest gold bars.

“Oh shoot, I won 20 bucks!” Darla said, forgetting you could actually win these things. She handed the scratcher over to the cashier, who looked it over, had her sign something, and handed her a twenty.

“Luck of the Irish, what are you gonna do with it?” the cashier asked. Darla wasn’t sure, but she began to peruse the gas station, looking for something to buy with her newfound riches.

Two minutes later, she returned with a big bag of peanuts, two one-liter bottles of pop, and a cake that read, “Happy birthday Jordan!” from the frozen section.

The cashier began to ring her up, “Is it Jordan’s birthday today?”

“I don’t know a Jordan,” Darla explained. “I just like lemon cake.”

Frankie Gets an Ice Cream

When there’s 18 flavors of ice cream to choose from—and you’re an eight-year-old girl—the world really is full of magic. Charlie had already picked out his flavor, chocolate-malted-crunch—the only flavor he ever got. Frankie on the other hand, was looking at all the flavors like she’d never heard of ice cream before.

“You gotta pick something Frank, you’ve been looking at the ice cream for five minutes. It’s not gonna change.”

“I’ll take one scoop of bubblegum, and one scoop of birthday cake,” Franky finally decided.

“In a cup or cone?” the man behind the counter asked.

“In a cone,” Frankie replied.

“No actually we’ll take it in a cup,” Charlie interrupted. “You always make a huge mess with a cone.”

The ice cream man suggested, “Well I could put it in a cup and put a cone on top, no extra charge.”

“You my friend, are an American hero,” Charlie told him. “And a

scoop of chocolate-malted-crunch in a cup, for me.”

The ice cream man scooped up one scoop of bubblegum and one scoop of birthday cake, in a cup, then put a cone on top, scooped up one scoop of chocolate-malted-crunch, in a cup, then began to ring them up.

“Alright that’ll be \$7.16,” the ice cream man told Charlie. Charlie took out the crisp ten from his wallet, and gave it to the man, got his change, and gave the man a one-dollar tip, before he and Frankie sat at a table, and began to eat their ice cream.

“What’d you get? Bubblegum and birthday cake?” Charlie asked.

“Yep!” Frankie replied, taking a big bite out of her empty cone.

“You know, sometimes you act like an eight-year-old girl.”

“I am an eight-year-old girl,” Frankie informed him.

“Yeah well... sometimes you act like one.”

They continued to eat their ice cream.

“The answer was twenty, by the way,” Frankie told him.

“Excuse me?”

“The answer to the riddle! Forty cows, twenty ate chicken, so that means twenty didn’t.”

Charlie took it all in for a moment.

“Do cows eat chickens?” Charlie asked, although he was pretty sure they didn’t.

“I don’t know Charles, maybe they do, maybe they don’t. But that’s not really the point. Can’t you suspend your disbelief for the sake of a riddle?” Frankie challenged.

Charlie gave out a laugh, “Yeah, I suppose I can. That’s a pretty good one.”

An Unlikely Coincidence and an Even More Unbelievable Hero

Jordan’s birthday cake sat on Frankie’s lap, as her and Darla drove down Coldwater after a day of lotteries and memories. Frankie grasped the string of the balloon in her right hand, as it swayed in the wind outside the window. She should not be blamed for letting

go as a 2006 Toyota Camry made a sharp left onto Coldwater, cutting Darla off and causing her to slam the brakes, in turn making Frankie act upon her instincts to grab the cake to ensure it didn't fall, leading to the balloon's free ascent into the air. And even with all that, Darla bumped into the Toyota. Frankie, of course, was freaking out, crying as the balloon floated away from the car. Darla tried to calm her down while pulling over behind the Toyota and searching for her insurance information in the glovebox—but truth be told, she was just as upset about it as Frankie.

A man in his 60's exited the car, wearing an angry face which, to be fair, he'd been wearing long before the car accident. He had a grimy look to him—his hair wasn't greasy or anything, and his fingernails were clean, but you could tell the man had some grime in his soul. He approached Darla's car ready to kill, but his internal rampage was cut short in seeing a little girl crying with such an intense sadness. So all he could ask Darla was if the girl was okay, to which she said she was fine, but that the accident had caused her to let go of her balloon. The man told her that, as a little boy, he had a stuffed lion, and to this day he's still a little upset about losing it. And as he told his story, he saw, in the distance, a yellow balloon caught in a tree.

So he climbed the tree. And he untangled the string, making sure to be careful the branches didn't puncture the balloon, and he approached the crying Frankie, and offered it to her. She took it by the string, and looked at the strange man who had just saved the day, and she grabbed his hand, and thanked him.

There was no real damage done to either car, and just as quickly as the woman and the little girl had come into the man's life, they drove off. Frankie opened the window, stuck her head out, and smiling, waved at the man goodbye. And for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime, Hobbes smiled back.

How It All Ends (In Retrospect)

A few hours later, the soda was poured into the western-themed

mugs, the peanuts placed in the western-themed bowl, and the DVD inserted into the player. They were all on the couch, watching *Mississippi Ninja: The Sculptor's Revenge*, eating some peanuts, drinking some pop, and eating Jordan's birthday cake—Frankie, Darla, and the balloon.

And hopefully, it really did all make sense in the end.