

Ken Poyner

## THE EMERGENCY

Early risers catch them first, taking their dogs on extra long walks to see if they can determine the depth of the infestation. When time is decent, calls from resident to resident confirms that all the residential streets are subject to idiosyncratic balloon vendors. One street, the vendors have only yellow balloons; the next only red. Blue segregated from purple. Children peer at windows, hoping their favorite color is attached to their street. On one special lane, the vendors hold oversized clutches of multiple colors. Worst of all, there is a cul-de-sac with balloon vendors having no balloons at all.

## LEGACY

Quibble has been eyeing the balloonman each morning since he first showed up two weeks ago. It is always the same vendor, always on the same corner, always with the same clutch of balloons. Quibble keeps a notebook, documenting that this vendor every day begins with three red balloons, three blue balloons, three yellow balloons. When he sells one, he quickly inflates from his rolling helium supply a balloon of the same color as the one sold. When he closes his stand, he will have nine balloons in the original colors inflated. Quibble commits to soon requesting a black balloon.

## ADVANCING CULTURE

Little Johnny has eighteen balloons cuddling against the ceiling of his room. There is no formal competition, yet he suspects he is way ahead all of his classmates. His parents alter the path along which they walk the dog in order to pass a different balloon vendor most trips, and buy him a new unique balloon for his collection. He has not explained to them that it is number that matters, not variety. He says nothing so as not to upset the mechanism of supply. The balloon vendors have unraveled the game, reposition themselves to make the best of envy.

## INCOMPLETE

A late evening of unattended porch lights. Decent people are in bed, with a few tolerated sinners still rocking quietly with the third one-too-many beers. Streets see nothing, except an occasional cat crossing. One couple has fallen asleep in a car on Cemetery Row. Having hoped for more, but fumbled in the execution, they could not wait out an answer to what comes next and implausibly dozed. One will wake just before dawn and begin testing public excuses. In his bedroom, lights out, watching the tangle of balloons on the ceiling, Little Johnny ponders if one more would be enough.

## DEVOTION

Little Johnny has long owned a pellet rifle. With it he has busted an army of bottles and cans, a small murder of birds, and a cat or two. Neighbors think it might be dangerous, but it is part of the image Big Johnny holds dear, so it is nominally tolerated. With the recent community children's balloon-color divide, he has put the rifle to more directed use. Lurking across the street, from some protected blind, he can fell the apostate-colored balloons of stalked balloon vendors. What color he reveres, self-righteously leaving those balloons aloft, changes with the availability of targets.

## CONVERSION

They become organized around color. Children in the blue camp swap their red balloons with children in the red camp, taking away liberated blue balloons. So it is with all other colors: black, white, yellow, swirl. The migration into monochromatic sects has taken time. Multiple trades had earlier to be made across multiple forming sects. Now, in the final spasms of this exercise, combination trades are necessary, the negotiation skills of children tested too soon. Parents fear how it will sum. Then, one morning, a red sect balloonist poses on her porch, blue balloon on short leash, and a pin.