

Balloons

9:03

This was the earliest Robbie had been awake in five weeks. In the corner of the lively Surry Hills café—his sister’s choice—he sat, waiting at a two-seater. He sipped warm water, poured from a dirty bottle. He overheard conversations.

The girl to his left was pretty in a scary sort of way, dark eyeliner and pale skin, and she talked about her trip to Paris and how beautiful it was when it rained and for a moment he imagined himself there, with her, walking in the rain and holding her hand and when they reached a quiet stretch on the street or an impasse in conversation, he would lean in and kiss her and they would forget about the rain.

Another girl sat opposite the pretty-scary one, nodding and listening intently. She said little and his imaginary girlfriend talked on and on.

The older man sitting opposite his table read the sport pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. One must keep up to date with uniformed playfighting.

Once the man had exhausted that section, he skimmed the front page and set it down and looked, for the first time, at what must be his wife, sitting opposite.

She was talking loudly on her phone, oblivious to her surrounds yet disturbing nobody.

There was the smell of expensive coffee and pretence in the air.

Robbie waited with his dirty water and quiet eavesdropping until she arrived.

9:08

Robbie had not seen his sister in... He could not remember. She walked in past the espresso machine, brushed past the tables, and sat swiftly opposite him.

“You’re early,” she said, catching her breath.

“There’s the menu. I haven’t ordered yet.”

She had not yet taken her purse off her shoulder, but she was giving him that look again. He refused to decipher that look because deep down, if he gave the thought any more time in his mind’s eye, he would know it was not a good look. Better to live not knowing.

He let the balloon of silence expand.

“Jesus, Robbie,” said she, popping it.

The Parisienne was paying her bill and he looked over and for a moment they locked eyes, but he looked away and so did she.

Robbie spent the next few seconds questioning whether there was anything in that look. That is, before he realised, he was overthinking again. And then his mind was blank again.

“Robbie.”

“What.”

His sister exhaled lightly, half annoyed, half knowing. She cast her eyes over the menu. It was brief.

“I’m just gonna get a coffee. You can get food if you want. I have time.”

Robbie pretended to look at the menu.

“I’ll stick to water.”

His sister nodded.

The Parisienne walked through the café, her friend following close behind, and they walked out the door and turned the corner and were out of sight.

It was quieter now.

The *Herald* man’s wife had hung up and they were now bickering quietly about God-knows-what, but if Robbie was to guess, it would be how he never pays attention to her, and he would rebut that she is always on the phone so how is he meant to pay attention to her if she’s busy talking and they would then go quiet again.

“What are you thinking about?” pried the sister.

Robbie considered honesty for a moment.

“Nothing.”

“Is that right?”

He nodded.

“Well, if you’re not going to say anything, I don’t know why I came.”

Robbie and his sister felt the second balloon expanding.

9:13

For the first time in the near ten minutes Robbie had been sitting there, a waitress ambled over.

“Drinks to start off?”

“I’ll have a long black,” his sister replied, “and he’ll stick with water.”

“And are you ready to order food?”

“Nothing for us, thank you,” she said.

The waitress scurried away, and the hiss of the milk steamer exploded in the distance.

There was an awkward beat between the two siblings. They did not look particularly alike, even accounting for difference of gender.

Robbie leaned back in the chair. His sister leaned forward to match the new distance, looking, almost staring at him, trying to provoke a second of eye contact. He relented for a moment before looking down again, thinking why she always looked at him that way and why she didn’t just act normal around him and what was wrong with what he was doing.

She popped the second balloon.

“You’re being a shitty brother, you know that?”

Robbie’s eyes widened, tiredly, feigning surprise.

“Really.”

“Yeah, really. You know, at least I’m putting in an effort. You never text me.”

“*You never text me.*”

A third balloon was filling up. Until—

“Why’s it all on me?” he probed.

“Why’s it all on you? I just told you why it’s all on you. *I* make an effort. *You* don’t. That’s why.”

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. New frustration tumbled in.

“How about you reach out to me once in a while? Why is that so hard?”

Robbie knew why it was so hard. He couldn’t say it. Not to her face. The fourth balloon was fast expanding.

9:18

The waitress returned with the sole coffee and set it down. A clink as the saucer touched down, but no other sound. Briskly she moved away.

His sister sipped the coffee, he the water.

9:23

“I’ll try,” Robbie said.

Pop goes the fourth balloon.

“Really? Or are you just saying that?”

“Really.”

He smiled at her. She looked endearingly at him. She finished her coffee. Her phone pinged.

“I’ve got to go,” she said.

“That’s alright. I’ll pay for your coffee.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

“Thank you,” she said.

She collected her purse and their eyes met and she looked content, hopeful, believing she would see him again soon and it would be like long ago when they were brother and sister and they needed no mediation, no remedy to be so.

She left.

Robbie walked to the front and paid the bill.

The older couple was now silent again.

The husband had picked up *The Daily Telegraph* and flipped immediately to the back side, searching, scanning for some story he had not read yet.

The wife was on another phone call, talking about another couple and their divorce and how hard that will be on their kids and if you knew who was getting the house because they live in Vauclose, don’t they, and whoever gets it is sure to get a boatload for it.

For a long while he did not see her again.