

LOVE
IS A
RED BALLOON

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a novelette

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Author

Back Cover

For Penny
A woman with an abundance of love
A true Bohemian revolutionary

LOVE IS A RED BALLOON

Hello.

I recently watched a film from waaay, way, way, back in the olden days. You know, proper old - flat - like you're watching a book, only with someone else's much inferior imagination in place of your own, like it's just a whole load of photographs, on a wheel, with a lamp, and a lens... I mean, it was practically monochromatic, but I digress (good word; very grown up). Mum said that it was a favourite of hers - the film, not the word - and I could tell she wanted to do that thing where we sit in the same room and don't talk, but are still sharing in something, somehow. So I humoured her and patiently sat through it. I am a good child. My mother is lucky, really. Especially when you consider all the *other* types of problems that I could be having *at my age*. You'd think with me being patient and considerate, and really quite clever, that my mum would be cock-a-hoops, but if she is then she hides it really well.

So anyway, I was watching this film with these people pretending to be these other people that they weren't (which totally wasn't obvious at the outset and there were no disclaimers or anything), through the medium of collective deception (like a fiction, I think), which is okay as long as everyone knows that these people are basically lying, which makes me wonder why bother in the first place, right? And also, just because everyone agrees to stow their disbelief, doesn't exactly make it right. One minute, the film-making falsifiers are doing it, the next minute you have mob rule and lynchings and everyone's dead (except a small number of people doing the final few lynchings). Mum just huffed and carried on knitting when I made this important point, but then she often does that. I love my mum but she's not as clever as me and so can often get left behind by my more incisive observations. Mums though: can't tell 'em that they're weird, can't not tell 'em.

Back to this vintage film. In it, one of the lying people doing the acting to appear as if they were really some other person (real or imagined, because they didn't state which), said:

"Love? ... Love. Above all things I believe in love. Love is like oxygen. Love is a many-splendored thing. Love lifts us up where we belong. All you need is love."

Mum didn't say, but I think it was an historical account of how a convoluted deception works (ironically). I mean, I don't know about you, but I can totally see those oldtimers from *sooo* long ago, back on old-Earth, living in elephants. I mean, elephants were *big*, so there'd be plenty of room, right?

Now, I'll come onto why I mention this in a minute. First, I have to deal with two - well, three actually, but I'll stick to two - factual inaccuracies with this statement. I mean, I shouldn't even have to bother, but you'd be surprised what some people will just take at face value. No, really.

So, the first of my first point is that love isn't like oxygen. Only oxygen is like oxygen. I mean, it has an atomic number of 8, is a member of the chalcogen group of elements (which strangely, also includes polonium), is a highly reactive nonmetal and an oxidising agent; al-

though that last one is pretty obvious, so if you'd already got that then it's not particularly impressive. What is less well known is that oxygen is the third most abundant element in the whole universe. And round here it exists in mostly diatomic form, which is handy as without dioxygen we'd all be dead in three minutes. Now, I'm working anecdotally here, but I'm pretty sure that we would definitely not all be on the floor gasping to death if we hadn't had any love for three minutes. Plus, exactly what is the atomic number of love? And no, it isn't 2 (that's helium, obviously). Love doesn't have an atomic number, in case you were wondering.

And, the second of my first point is that love isn't all you need. Aside from oxygen (see previous point), you need many, far more important things besides love. For example, is love on Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Well, actually it is - I just checked - but, like way down in the middle after food, shelter, breathable atmosphere, important stuff like that. And anyway, grownups are always nailing love onto the end of everything, like it's super essential, when in actual, factual, fact, you can't survive on love. Despite what some of the others at school might think. And say. Often and repeatedly. Purely to embarrass, coz I'm pretty sure that they've never actually seen or done half (more like a quarter, really) the things that they say they have.

In case you're wondering (I would be), the third of my first point (which I decided not to include) is to do with the fact that love cannot lift us up, because it lacks the density (or indeed any physical mass or measurable form) to act as a lifting agent. But I decided not to get into that one as it's basically, completely, blindingly (non ad verbum) obvious to anyone, even Snotty Wilbur-43.

Hmm, I may use old-Earth Latin more (weirdly, a dead language even back then, but West-Germanic lingual/lexical roots and all that) to ensure that others know when not to take what I say literally literally (or when to, which is all of the rest of the time, so maybe not then). Plus, it makes me look dazzlingly clever. Which I already am of course, but those less clever than me often have trouble spotting it (which is understandable).

Mum says that I shouldn't take everything in life so literally, as if there's a choice. But, like how else am I supposed to take it? Events are events. Stuff happens. Stuff doesn't not happen (even stuff not happening is a form of stuff happening). So how can they not be literally, literal? Sometimes I worry for my mum. Although, in fairness to her, it's not just Mum. She's a victim of a society that likes to keep the door slightly ajar on a little light reinterpretation and the odd bit of revisionist airbrushing of the more salubrious, if less sanctifying, times, when it suits the collective to exercise some historical amnesia - at least that's what Messr Lintelstrasse-37 says. Seems fair to me. Whatever it was that he was talking about, that is. I think he's caught what many of the gen-37's seem to have: bitterness. Looks to be contagious to me, so I may stay away from old Lintelstrasse for a while. Just to be safe.

Life is like a maths problem as far as I can make out. There are right answers, and there are wrong answers, and there are different ways to get to either. Right. Wrong. Simple. Like: up, down; left, right; top, bottom; on, off; black, white. Why everyone feels this need to make it all *sooo* much more confusingly complicated when it so obviously need not be is quite bey-

ond me. I mean, not taking literal events literally, is literally the antithesis of, of... well, wherever that thought was heading. Literalism? (it's a real word, I looked it up).

Sometimes, because I am cursed with being so brainy, I can begin a thought and then not quite know how to finish it off. I think it's because I haven't been fed enough raw data yet, which is a function of time over youth: a universal constant that I can't change. Linearity and literalism, you know? When I have been (fed enough data), I'll have enough to crunch in great grinding bites/bytes that will allow me to form new and ever more magnificent deductions of great import (good use of the word *magniferous*, there - I sometimes make up words when an appropriate word doesn't exist. I suspect that they'll fall into common use in time). After all, all of life's problems are basically just maths equations, with some just needing more brain-time than others. I mean, what keeps this balloon in the air? Correct: maths. Well maths, plus quite a bit of a common light element in gaseous form (hydrogen, basically. Atomic number of 1, so literally *the* lightest element, *and* the most abundant). I'm really into the gaseous (that can exist in that physical state in human-survivable environments) end of the Periodic Table right now (there is no actual "end" or group of gaseous elements - or *technically* gaseous elements - as all elements can exist in any state). Really interesting (elements that exist routinely as gases, that is), I'll take a moment to give you my thoughts on them when I get chance.

But right now, I have a bigger fish to fry. We don't have fish here, no oceans, or streams, or even land, come to think of it, so not literally - it's an idiom. Hmm, I wonder if that's what Mum meant when she was banging on about me taking things too literally. I mean, I can't literally fry a bigger (or indeed any) fish, while being in possession of exactly no fish (also, I'm not allowed to cook after that slight issue a few months ago, which resulted in, not only having to eat in the crew canteen for a week, but also the immediate and ongoing cessation of my weekly credit; although Mum will relent soon; she always does). I shall have to have a think about that. I'm sure that there's a logical way to square that circle. Hah, there I go again. You see what I'm having to contend with?

Which rather brings me back to why I am writing this letter to you in the first place. Plus, I think that I may have been avoiding the very thing that I am being brought back around to, at some unconscious level (although, not *actually* unconscious, clearly).

Love.

There, I said it. Not out loud or anything, but I said it. I can see it, there, on the page. In letters and everything.

I'll be honest (I'm always honest, it's just an expression), I've been trying to avoid the whole messy, sordid, embarrassing subject. Mind you, almost anything involving other humans is embarrassing and very often messy. Certainly smelly. I mean, obviously, I love other humans. Some humans. Like my mum, despite her being my mum and quite annoying most of the time, and, and then, there's... well, just Mum really.

Up til now, at least.

You see, more recently I have been the subject of some, um, unwelcome feelings, that appear - at least from preliminary research - to be signs of the early onset of... of, well, love, at least I think. But how d'you really know, though?

Sooo annoying.

They should invent a test. I can see it now - a test tube with a lovely purple liquid in it and a very clever scientist person in a white lab coat and goggles, who dips some litmus paper into the test tube and then checks it against a nice, bright, colour chart (I do like a colour chart). Red, it's too late, you're totally in love. Nothing to be done. *Neexxt!* Blue, you're normal. Just keep taking the pills. Orange, you're still salvageable, if we operate immediately. Disclaimer: please note that orange is not a derivative of the primary colours, blue and red, I just needed a fourth colour and so I just put it in there even though purple is the only result of a blue-red mix. Not without yellow (the other primary colour, which *technically* means that you can then produce *all* colours, but anyway). I don't want you thinking that I didn't know that. I know a lot about colours. A lot.

Also, you can't actually operate to remove early-onset love. I think, anyway.

Love may not be like oxygen (as I think that I have successfully argued), but it is like another element on the Periodic Table. I think you know which one I'm talking about. Has an atomic number of 17? Second lightest of the halogens? Yep, chlorine; really, really irritating and makes your eyes water, before choking you to death. I've been practicing my jokes. Mum says I should; that I may make some friends that way. I didn't ask her the really quite obvious question of: *why* in the sky would I *want* to do that? It would just make her make that face, and then I'd feel guilty and I'm too young for all that.

Recently, just after this all erupted (literally), and while we were out on the promenade, Mum tried to have *that* talk with me. Honestly, it's like she's psychic. She kept talking about how, when two people are very much in love, they... etcetera, etcetera. You can imagine what it was like. Excruciating, and made all the more so by the fact that she chose to have *that* conversation while we were *out*. Sometimes, I wonder what goes through grownup's minds (not careful consideration for their child, that's for blinking sure). I mean, under what circumstances, like ever, would having *that* talk, in public, be acceptable? I swear she does it just to humiliate me. I can still feel the flush in my cheeks. Everyone must have seen it.

Sooo embarrassing.

And obviously, I already knew everything that she said (or mostly didn't say, so why even bother, right?). It's like some sort of ingrained parent thing. As if they have to do it, even though neither party can bare the horror. It's like putting two kittens in a ring a forcing them to fight, while squeezing lemon juice into their eyes and making them lick battery terminals. Just wrong on every level. Humans weren't built with that kind of parent-child bond. Eww!!! (I feel that three exclamation marks are fully justified in this instance). I wish someone would tell the parents, coz they obviously aren't listening to their kids.

So, yes. There I was minding my own business, trying to not get on the wrong side of Snotty Wilbur-43 (although in my experience, all of hir sides are wrongly sided) when it

happened, and everything that I thought I knew, got up - suddenly and without explanation - packed its bags (in a satisfyingly meticulous and colour-separated fashion, I might add) climbed over the safety netting and went flying off over the side of the gondola without so much as a, "you're on your own with this one, messr!" Just like that.

I'll probably come back to Snotty, but for the time-being know only that, like most places here, individual messrs choose their gender, or choose not to (that's still a choice) when they come of age. Until then, we, like me and my fellow gen-43's, remain genderless (socially, not biologically, otherwise how would we... never mind), and for the most part our leanings, even our biodentities, remain largely unknown. Not so for Snotty Wilbur-43. I would bet the water harvest on hir choice when the day comes.

We live in the sky, here in Venus (you'll know this already, but I feel that it's important to state, after all, context isn't only for kings, you know), in tin boxes suspended beneath these massive balloons - caught up in great metallic profusions of wire rigging - that perpetually circle the planet like old-Earth whales, basking in the warmth of an abundant sun (whales didn't actually circumnavigate the oceans of old-Earth, it's just a sort of descriptive phrase). Now, living in the sky is completely superlatively über cool (except when it isn't, which is quite often) and if I were the romantic sort - Which. I. Am. Not. - living above the clouds would be quite beautiful. Even more so I suspect, if the clouds in question weren't made from sulphuric acid, smelled of eggy farts and could melt your face off.

See, totally not the romantic type.

Ages ago, way before I was born, there was talk of settling down on the Venusian surface, but that ended with the grizzly deaths of those really very unlucky pioneers that were sent down to establish a foothold base (they weren't the first; that honour fell to Tremmal Furillen, who came all the way from old-Earth, and was the first human to actually walk about a bit on the surface - no idea why). Apparently, those poor pioneers went mad and ate each other, which seems plausible (the surface is rubbish, after all), but it may also be a myth, which old Lintelstrasse says was spread by our facist overlords to stop the proletariat (which is us) from questioning our place in society (which is the balloon, I think).

Messr Lintelstrasse-37 can be a bit like that, plus, I'm not really quite sure how thinking of a bunch of unfortunates from gen-9 eating each other is supposed to make me feel more disposed to our current political system. But then ancients, like old Lintelstrasse, and Mum (more importantly), can be proper strange sometimes. When I'm that old, I'm just going to either, not say anything to the new gen and wait to die nice and quietly, or say really useful stuff that will help them deal with the pressures of school (caused by the students, not the learnings), and why mums act odd almost all of the time. Stuff like that. And love, coz I will definitely have that fully figured out by then, which would totally save all this hassle I'm going through right now.

The reason why the Venusian surface is so completely not worth visiting (putting the cannibalism thing aside for a moment and concentrating on the actual sciencey stuff), is that it's probably the most inhospitable surface in the System. Certainly amongst the rocky planets

(which includes the worlds of the inner system that possess an iron core and rocky outer mantle). The surface is so frazzlingly scorching that less dense metals, like zinc or lead, would exist in liquid form (if there were any there, which there aren't; it's just one of those empty facts that people trot out), the atmosphere at ground level is dense enough to actually change states to become a super-critical fluid (so like bone-snappingly, liquid level dense), and it's a mix of very not very breathable carbon and sulphur. And I haven't even mentioned the volcanos and all the lava, the acid rain and the lightning (although I have now). So if you're gonna live in Venus, it's up here (where it's a bit smelly sometimes), not down there (where you'll likely get eaten and/or burned/crushed/suffocated to extreme death).

The sky itself is mostly the same story. Choking-freezing-death, or choking-melting-death. But - and this is the important bit - at this altitude (where we live) there's a band of nitrogen-oxygen air, ten kilometres deep that also happens to be around room temperature (which room, no-one ever says) and because of the Earth-like gravity (the only thing that the iron core below is doing for us) and the fact that we travel with the massive winds, negating them, makes this band - this *temperate zone* - an oddly perfect place for humans to live. There's even local biota, in the form of microbial spores, which farts out phosphine, but we leave them alone and they don't trouble us. Sandwiched between a fiery hell below and the frozen wastes above, is a warm, fresh(ish), humid, one-G strip of human survivability. Just no land. Nowhere to cut down a tree or fight a war over (I'm pretty certain that these were the two most common things that old-Earth used its land for, so totally overrated). And the temperate zone is everywhere, even up at the poles, but most balloon communities, like us, sail the safer, more stable, equatorial streams.

Below, via the glass floorlights or over the side, through the safety netting, the sulphurous clouds look like one of Mum's less successful attempts at homemade rice pudding: grey and lumpy and yellowing in a slightly nauseous way (*do not* tell her I said that, she'd have a massive fit). The whole planet is sheathed in those poisonous clouds, so of the lands below, we never see a sausage (expression: there are no sausages, at least not down there). Radar and lander images show the surface as mostly a really hazy, totally enormous, old-Earth sunset over a barren, rocky desert, during a humid summer lightning storm. With sulphurous volcanos. And lava. Plus, it makes you go mad and eat people, so...

Above us is a kind of an all-encompassing, dome-like creamy sky, the colour of a vanilla milkshake (if they even exist, coz I mean, who doesn't just order the double chocolate chip choccy dough with extra chocolate? Seriously, who?). The sun, we're told, is bigger than if it were seen from old-Earth (obviously, we're 26 million miles closer). So if the Earth's sun can be blocked out with a finger held at arms length, well then here it takes a whole fist, which in astronomical terms means that it's blooming massive, and it hangs there like it's about to fall on top of us (it won't), as if we live in a giant pot and the sun's the lid (we don't). Of course we can't see the sun most of the time because the balloon is always in the way, but at sunrise and sunset it puts in a brief appearance for the gondola portholes and promenades. During these times it's a large eggy-yellow disk (I always try to watch it on a Friday), set

within a fluffy, whisked-cream sky. Luckily, the light is so bright and even that it also reflects off the smelly clouds below, so that captured solar energy is plentiful and reliable, which is what keeps our balloon - all balloons, in fact - sailing the temperate zone in a perpetual race across the butterscotch sky, like an endless journey with no destination (which is actually pretty much true).

Our balloon is like most in Venus, I think. It's called the *Narwhal*. Many of the balloon communities are named after whales because grownups lack imagination. If I could name our balloon, I think I would call it... the, *Does It Really Have To End Like This?* Way more better, if a bit of a mouthful. Not really sure quite what it refers to, but I heard someone shout it once and I really liked it. It suggests to me that the universe isn't exactly a bed of roses (expression, obviously - roses could never survive in space) for other people either, and that knowing that these other messrs have things that end when they didn't want them to - or not, when they did - kinda makes me feel better, somehow. Like a shared pain. Strange, I know, but then humans are quite strange, so...

Recently, we went on a field trip, so I know quite a bit about our balloon - the *Narwhal*. Above our heads, there are thirteen individual balloons, filled with hydrogen (the lightest of the elements with an atomic number of 1, and also the most abundant in the whole universe - did I mention that already? Possibly. I'm really into gases right now) and air (which in Venus is also a lifting gas). The balloons are all stopped from floating off by a massive network of rigging that holds them in place and lets the riggers climb up and repair holes and check the solar cells, stuff like that. Our balloon has nine gondolas, which are strung out in a line and linked together like the carriages of an old-Earth train (I've seen pictures and it's true). They're each about ten metres wide and forty long, so quite big really. There are some balloon communities with just two or three gondolas, so we're quite lucky. But then there are also some that are massive. *Citadel-balloons* they're called and it's said that the biggest has over seventy huge gondolas, with each one being over one-hundred metres long. It must look like a writhing grey snake caught up in the tangled netting of a passing whale (maybe). What must it be like to live there? With all that space (yum) and all those people (yuk).

Each of our gondolas has a particular purpose, like housing, the promenade, production, processing, the usual sort of stuff, and flapping about off the rear gondola is a really, really big trailing gauze, which we use to harvest water vapour from the air. All of Venus's water oceans evaporated away like billions (literally) of years ago and so now they only exist as vapour, so we have to reclaim it from the sky. Mum says that Venus provides us with everything that we need, we just have to work a bit to get at it. She says that life isn't a picnic, and that we tried that back on old-Earth, but having everything lying about the place just meant that we took it all for granted, so it's better to have to work for it. She says that if something is free then it has no value, but if it comes at a cost, even if it's only in labour, then we will be more appreciative of it. Personally, I think she's stupendously wrong (as usual). I'd much rather do the picnic thing and just being given stuff without any effort at all, but secretly I can see her point. Life is hard, blah, blah, and balloons don't sail themselves etcetera, etcetera. I still don't like it

though. Grownups can be *sooo* serious about like everything, all the time. Sometimes, it would just be nice to forget to turn the tap off and not get a three-hour lecture about where water comes from, you know?

Occasionally, balloons hook-up, and when they do, air-bridges are placed between them and people cross over and meet up and buy things and whatever. When it happens it's really good fun because, well another balloon, right? The people not so much, but another balloon, up close, with the balloons actually touching while they hook the rigging together. Old Lintelstrasse once said that we shouldn't hook-up because of the threat of piracy, but I've never seen a pirate balloon. I asked Mum about them at the time, but she just gave me a funny look, shrugged and carried on sewing up the hole in my school jumper (I told her that I'd caught it on a net-post on the promenade railing, but I didn't really), so I wasn't exactly sure what to believe at the time. So, I had a big think and decided that they *do* exist, coz that is waaay more interesting. Old Lintelstrasse said that they live in the upper reaches (we sail the lower altitudes where it's warmer, which just seems better, if a bit smelly occasionally), so that they can simply reduce their buoyancy and just sail down onto unsuspecting balloons, to then... then, well, *do* pirating. It all sounded pretty cool to me, but old Lintelstrasse has some pretty strange ideas, so...

So, that's me and my balloon.

- end of sample -

want to find out what happens next? you only have to ask: me@markjsuddaby.com

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mark j suddaby

Born in England, in the year of Apollo 13 and Luna 17, Mark grew up sitting in front of the telly, in his paisley pyjamas, staring wide-eyed as *Doctor Who* (Tom Baker), *Space 1999* and *Blake's 7* romped across wobbly sets in their terrible outfits and bad hair. Mark grew up in a large family, which conversely meant time spent playing alone, often within the confines of a boundless imagination.

At sixteen, Mark realised that he was unlikely to become a genuine space hero - and school hadn't been a huge triumph - so he joined the Army. After a modicum of mild success here and there, Mark left the military after 25 years having reached the dizzying heights of the sixth floor of the Ministry of Defence, where he worked as a staff officer, preparing papers for senior officers and wishing that he was anywhere else in the universe.

Mark now lives in the West Country where he spends most of his time trying to get his Lotus to think that it's a car and wondering what it would be like, if...

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Love is a Red Balloon

As far as I can work out, from examining my whole life in its complete entirety so far, humans are loud, smelly, and *really* annoying. Plus, they lie, like, *all* the time. And if it weren't for them, and all their endless banality (my new favourite word), I'd be able to get in a lot more important thinking. Being clever is already really hard, without these distractions all the blinking time. Mum says that I should lighten up a bit and not take everything so literally, but that's just silly (and technically inaccurate, I mean how can you take literal stuff *too* literally?). Sometimes Mum can be super annoying.

And then there's the Red Balloon, which just appeared out of thin air (literally - okay, not literally, but you know what I mean), and now I'm having all these new and weird *feelings*. Feelings that I've never had before and would *really* rather not be having now, thank you very much. Emotions aren't really my thing, if I'm honest (which I always am). I'm better with maths; more ony/offy. And colours. I'm a big fan of colours. Big fan.

Sometimes (well, all time time, nearly), life can be *totally* super odd and confusing.

Which is why I'm writing to you, because I think that I might be in, well... *love*, and you're the only one who can fix it.