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Category: Flash Fiction

Water Balloon Fights in Autumn

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I stepped pink ballet flat-first into a room that still had a chalkboard, olive green, glassy floor tiles, and giant ruby welcome banners on each wall. I was awestruck. My first *real* classroom. It was so much bigger than preschool, which didn't count, of course, everyone knew that. We never did anything interesting enough, plus why did nap time even exist? I didn't want to sleep at school, I didn't even want to sleep *ever*, and I couldn't imagine the day that I would. Back then, we had this insane surplus of energy. We did everything in our power to avoid hearing that cursed "no" because it meant shoving a cap onto our imaginations, like trying to fit into a size six shoe when you're so obviously an eight.

We ran around in circles, racing the wind herself, and we *knew* we could never beat her, but we didn't care, because we hadn't learned the restrictive concept of productivity. There was no such thing as wasting time, and besides, what was the problem with that? We had nothing *but* time.

Each recess, we had neon orange triangles loosely strung together on our hips chasing the same old, battered football soaring through cerulean skies, and it was the most beautiful thing we had ever seen. We let the chains of the smiling swings carry us as we waved to the Sun, not worrying about seeming silly if anybody saw us. There was nothing cooler than flying, anyway.

We had water balloon fights in Autumn, because the cold-water-and-chilly-air-combo gave us goosebumps and chattering teeth, and we knew we'd be offered hot chocolate by the grownups once we rushed back inside. Genius. We would rip off our gloves to grip those shiny, slippery balloons better, and it didn't matter if our fingers were turning numb and purple. Nothing could stop us! (Plus, icy hands meant more marshmallows.)

We actually told people about the books we read, because reading was just reading, and we didn't think there could ever be any judgment in that. We read *Michigan Chillers*, and imagined that we were the ones forced to escape twelve-foot tarantulas, gruesome ghouls, and swamp demons, all while wanting to seem too macho to possibly be scared by the thought of such creepy crises. We used to think, "What are classics?" We didn't even want to hear the answer, the name had bored us enough.

We never thought to diet—we couldn't imagine not eating cake *on purpose*—or obsessively smooth our hair in every mirror we walked past. Our socks didn't have to match, and we wanted to wear *at least* thirteen different colors at once. Anything less would be a disgrace to elementary schoolers everywhere. The real crime was sticking to boring browns and dull greys just because of maintaining "professionalism," whatever that meant. We saw our older sisters and brothers trade in soft, fleece sweatpants for harsh, unforgiving slacks, and we decided right then and there that we wanted nothing to do with their world.

When hot tears coated our cheeks, they were gently wiped away with soft tissues and warm embraces. We never once heard the heartbreaking phrase: "Grow up." We hadn't yet had to construct iron walls to numb the criticism. We thought the worst criticism we could ever receive was the lack of a gold star on a spelling test. All of our woes were always forgotten by the following hour, and there was nothing that couldn't be solved with a chocolate bar.

Now, we hold on a bit tighter when we hug our friends in greeting, because we know we might be running out of

days together. We eat off of stark white styrofoam trays because we don't want the extra attention we got from our glittery pink lunch boxes anymore. We sip our scalding caffeine, burning the roofs of our mouths each and every time, reminiscing the days of chilled apple juice boxes. Where did nap time go?