

# EARLY ONE MORNING

(FICTION)

by ashley mattsen

It was threatening to rain on the morning the beach balls were released. Peter had just slipped his key into the lock of his bookstore. He liked to come early to sit in the quiet and read for a while. He liked the feeling of being surrounded by books, and he liked the dark wooden floors and the smell of printed pages. As he got older, it was harder to find peaceful places to read. It was part of the reason he had bought the bookstore from the tiny old man with the shaking fingertips: to have a quiet place to read. Now he came in before the day began. Before people began thumbing through paperbacks without intending to buy them; before authors began reading snippets of bad poetry and worse prose aloud in unlit corners to audiences that closed their eyes to feel the words slither through their ear canals, lighting a spark to ignite flames of revelation; before the shrill cries of the espresso machine drowned out the special muffled silence created by shelves of books. He was standing on the step, his key in the lock, when the first of the beach balls drifted by, carried with the already discarded morning papers through the wind tunnel of skyscrapers. Peter smiled.

Farther down the street, in the center of the square, an early morning tai chi class was warming up, their slow, identical movements not disturbing the pigeons pecking the sidewalks for crumbs. Exhaling slowly, Xue watched the progress of three balls as they made their way across the damp red brick of the square, their bright yellows, blues and reds shocking against the damp and sodden backdrop of streetlamps and naked trees. Soon there were others. A few seconds passed and there were even more. Now they were dancing around the feet of the tai chi class, kicked to and fro by slow moving feet until finally the instructor exhaled and murmured, "Acknowledge, accept, overcome." And behind her, Xue heard the steady flow of breathing change as the others smiled. Xue did not smile, but felt lifted up, grabbed underneath the armpits and propelled toward the sky. This moment was just for her.

"My grandson would like this," she thought, before she

remembered that she had not seen her grandson in almost five years, and that she did not know whether he would like it or not.

Angela and Don lived above the square in an apartment with a window through which the eyes of the totem pole stared. Angela often kept the blinds closed, especially at night, because she did not like the feeling of being watched. But upon waking she had felt the need for sunlight, even if it was castrated by overcast skies. And so the totem pole watched Angela and her husband argue. It was a long argument, one that would leave both of them shaking for minutes afterward, red-faced and gasping. The argument had begun when Don reminded Angela that he would be home late. Angela turned to the kitchen window, looked into the eyes of the totem pole and clenched her fingers around the edge of the counter. She heard Don screaming behind her, but time had slowed down. She felt like a rock in a river; his words flowed around her like water. She saw the class in the square and wondered, on a day like this, how they could bear to be outside. Then she saw the beach balls—a moving, seething ocean of reds and whites and blues that surrounded the people in the square and covered the old cigarette butts and pigeon shit and paper

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glued to the bricks by the rain. There were hundreds of them, thousands of them. And Angela laughed. She laughed until she heard the door slam somewhere behind her and her sides ached and her breath came in short gasps.

Brian had been sleeping on a bench near Union Station

when a curious bouncing rustle woke him. Although it was a cold morning, he stood, newspaper blankets falling to the ground, and picked up a ball, tossing it into the air as high

**It wasn't long  
before news  
helicopters  
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overhead...**

as he could. His open mouth glistened with strands of saliva as he threw his head back and laughed, the sound of his voice lost in the patter of the rippling and churning as the balls ricocheted from the bricks of the square and were shot high in the air by a playful wind.

Lee bicycled through them on his way to work, his severe black tie swinging from side to side, his sensible gray jacket unbuttoned and flapping against the slight swell of his stomach. He kicked them high in the air as he steered a course through the thickest, most concentrated clumps, enjoying the way his front tire pushed them aside in arcing paths to the left and right, as if he were parting soft waves of red and blue and yellow with the prow of his ship.

Through the early morning, the balls stayed in the square. Passengers pressed their noses against gang signs scratched into bus windows; drivers slowed their cars to a crawl and pulled over to watch until even the handicapped spaces were filled and the fire hydrants were blocked. It wasn't long before news helicopters circled overhead, turning their cameras from the bumper to bumper traffic on the freeway to the bustling, jumping mass of beach balls that flowed from the square out into the streets of the city. They pooled around streetlamps and clustered in bus shel-

ters. The balls stayed and stayed until the trains drew to a shuddering halt in the station and people poured out—sleepy people, taking delicate sips from eco-friendly coffee cups, people taking prodigious bites of bagel and dropping crumbs that would feed the pigeons for another day. People talking on cell phones and people checking their emails on smart phones. They did not notice what lay underfoot; they stomped on the balls and flattened them; they kicked them viciously into gutters where they lodged in the storm drains and caused dirty water to back up into the streets. The rain that had been threatening all morning finally fell, and the people put up their umbrellas and held their newspapers over their heads like the thick, dark curtains that close off a stage. And the balls grew heavy with the weight of the water until they lay lifeless on the pavement—half-inflated, motionless sacks of air.

By afternoon, all the balls were gone. Angela, home from work, sat at the ugly yellow kitchen table and thought for the hundredth time about painting it and wondered when her husband would be home. Lee kept his head down as he bicycled past the totem pole and thought of what he would cook for dinner and how nice it would feel to sink into his soft leather couch for a few hours. The sun made a brief appearance at sunset, lighting the water of Elliot Bay with a thousand yellow sparkles, and on the corner, the pigeons, in their tireless search for discarded scraps, pulled something red, blue and yellow out of the garbage can.

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