Aunt Ruby's Balloon
By
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Abbey was a little girl standing at the sink with her mother, when the doorbell rang and in stumbled her Great Aunt Ruby, laughing. Aunt Ruby's white hair wisped around her old face like milkweed silk, and the neckline of her purple dress plunged so low you couldn't help seeing her wrinkled cleavage. She held a shiny pink balloon.

"Aunt Ruby!" said Abbey's mother, drying her hands. "What a surprise!"
Abbey was silent, clutching her mother's apron.

The little girl's father, hearing the commotion, left his important papers and strode into the kitchen.

Aunt Ruby did a little dance, and sang, "It is such a beautiful day. I've never felt so happy and gay."

"Don't say such things," the father warned. "It's bad luck. You'll give yourself a kina hora and drop dead."

Aunt Ruby laughed and danced some more, then began to cough and totter.

Abbey's mother rushed over. "Be careful, Aunt Ruby. Sit down. Sit down. Can I get you something to eat?"

"No, no, no. I just want to take little Abbey outside to play with her balloon." She held out her gnarled hand to Abbey. "Come on, Abbey. Let's go out and have some fun!"

Abbey looked up at her mother, who sighed and glanced at her husband before nodding at Abbey.
"Okay," said her mother, "but just for a few minutes, it's getting dark. And stay away from the street. Don't run with sticks, or you'll put out an eye. And take a sweater, it might get chilly."

Abbey dutifully gathered her sweater and followed Aunt Ruby into the yard. Her aunt threw the sweater on the ground and tied the balloon to Abbey's wrist. Then she lay back in the grass and hummed and flapped her knobby bent knees, not caring when her skirt slipped all the way down to her belly, exposing her privates.

Abbey skipped around the yard giggling, and the balloon bounced in the air above her. She ran around in circles and it buffeted behind her. But when she veered too close to a thorn bush, the balloon popped.

Abbey exploded in tears, the limp string hanging from her hand. Her chest heaved with sobs. Aunt Ruby led her inside and called Abbey's mother.

"Her balloon broke," announced Aunt Ruby as she brushed bits of leaves and grass onto the pristine kitchen floor.

Her parents tried to console Abbey. They hugged her and brought her Kleenex and told her that balloons always break, it was bound to happen, she could get another balloon sometime. Or better yet, a good, sturdy toy that wouldn't break. They offered her food, even candy, and finally the mother and the father and Aunt Ruby gave up and left Abbey in her room to cry herself out.

After it had finally been quiet for several minutes, the three grown-ups tiptoed to Abbey's room. When they saw her sitting on her floor coloring, her parents warily backed out, but Aunt Ruby barreled past them. She looked at Abbey's puffy and stained face, and let out a guffaw.

"What's the matter, Abbey? You forget about your balloon?"

Abbey's face crumpled, and she wailed with renewed vigor.
"Oy!" cried her mother.

Her father mumbled under his breath – something about meshugena.

Aunt Ruby did a little jig and waved goodbye to the sobbing girl and her exasperated parents.

That was many years ago. Abbey is an old woman now. Aunt Ruby and her parents, long dead. Abbey knows that, despite a parent's most fervent longings, no one will avoid suffering. But whenever she sinks toward inconsolable sorrow, Abbey remembers her old Aunt Ruby and her belly shakes with laughter.