

HEAVEN IN OCTOBER

By Duncan Ros

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is the literary equivalent to comfort food. It depicts ordinary people in ordinary situations—people we easily recognize—in a plot driven narrative where both the writing and the story are very much down to earth. The characters are sympathetically drawn and the children realistically depicted, cute, but not too cute, which for any writer has to count as an accomplishment. The temptation to sentimentalize in this kind of story is great but the author avoids it handily and the last sentence, striking a perfect note, could not be improved upon. We liked the gentle humour at play here, and especially the touching, unexpected ending. The low key but observant prose rewards with quiet beauty. Quote: The kids had found a balloon, a little red one, and were playing a game, one where they keep the balloon from hitting the ground. They were laughing and screaming, jumping from the couch onto the floor. Vern looked at them and puffed on his Camel, a smile growing across his face. It hit the ground and the kids both squealed. Little Reese lost his balance and stepped on the red balloon with his sneaker. It popped loudly and they began to cry. If this were a Facebook page there'd be 'likes' all over it.*

Heaven in October

By Duncan Ros

Carly and Reese had just had their birthdays at Grandpa's house. There were balloons and streamers and party-blowers and leftover cake with thick pink frosting to celebrate the twins' fifth birthday. And they were cute twins; red hair, freckles, and little green eyes that seemed to stare out from somewhere else.

Their mother had a job interview and had given the kids to her dad for the day. It was the second interview in three months. She had been unceremoniously fired from her last job as a production grunt at a tomato sauce factory after she got sick with hepatitis A and spoiled the day's batch, which nearly resulted in a company-wide recall. The whole crew had to go in for a

shot, as well as the kids. Their daddy wasn't around; the stories ranged from exploring mountains in Canada to building churches in countries the twins couldn't even pronounce yet. The main point was that he was absent, and for better or worse, wasn't coming back. The kids wouldn't find out until they were older that it was all a bunch of made-up horseshit, for which they would resent their mother for the rest of her short and somewhat uneventful life.

Grandpa, a.k.a. Vern Jones II, was a surly scarecrow of a man, a little over six feet tall, with the look on his face like he was always half-way sucking on a lemon. Grandpa had worked for the railroad for nearly three decades as a switchman until he had his first heart attack. He went out on disability right around the time the doctors told his wife, Virginia, that she had stage four breast cancer. A few months later she was deep into the ground and he was even deeper into the booze.

He spent most of his days watching daytime T.V. (his favorite shows being that of the crime persuasion; *Law and Order*, *Blue Bloods*, *Criminal Minds*) and smoking the same kind of cigarettes he'd been smoking since he was fifteen: Camel Straights. Today, he'd opted to hold off on the booze until his daughter came for the grandkids, or at least try to. He had the Yankees vs. Astros playoff game on the tube instead of his usual police procedural.

"Grandpa, it's smokey in here," said one of them.

"Yeah, it's hard to breathe, *cough cough*," said the other, making noises like she was coughing but not actually coughing.

He sat there and looked at them from the brown leather recliner. Cute little buggers. The only way he could really tell them apart was that Carly was the girl, with a little green dress, and Reese was a boy wearing little cargo shorts and a striped sweater.

"It's smokey in here, Grandpa," said the girl again, this time louder.

“That’s because I’m smoking.”

“Mama says smoking is bad. It’ll kill you, Grandpa,” said the boy.

“I’m pretty sure it *is* killing me, kiddo,” said Vern. “If it’s bothering you so much, go ahead and open a window. I’ll turn the fan on.”

Carly walked over to the front window and pushed up on the pane as hard as she could, but it didn’t budge.

“You’ve got to unlock it, sweetheart.”

The girl gave him a blank look.

“The latch, you see it? You’ve got to turn the latch to open the window.” He started to get up but thought better of it. She’ll figure it out for herself, he thought. Reese ran over to help his sister. Finally, they had the window open and the sounds of the neighborhood came in.

“There you go,” said Grandpa Vern. He turned back to his ball game. Outside in the shrouded October sun, the changing leaves fell to the ground in the gentle wind, but nobody seemed to notice.

“Grandpa, will you take us to the park?” said the boy.

“Yeah, the park, the park!” said the girl.

The ballgame was a blowout. The Yankees defense was falling apart and the Astros were piling up run after run.

“Maybe later, after Grandpa is done watching his game.”

He sat there smoking with the ceiling fan going, watching Garrett Cole strike out another batter for the Yankees. He thought about dipping into the bottle of aged Jim Beam, but knew that Maggie would throw a fit if she came to get her kids and smelled whiskey on his breath.

The kids had found a balloon, a little red one, and were playing a game, one where they keep the balloon from hitting the ground. They were laughing and screaming, jumping from the couch onto the floor. Vern looked at them and puffed on his Camel, a smile growing across his face. It hit the ground and the kids both squealed. Little Reese lost his balance and stepped on the red balloon with his sneaker. It popped loudly and they began to cry.

“Jesus Christ, settle down. I’ve got a bum ticker. Shit.”

“The balloon, it popped, Grandpa,” said the girl. “Reese stepped on it with his dumb shoe.”

“He didn’t mean to.”

The kids began to cry again.

“We can just blow up another balloon. You two calm down. We’ve got more.” Vern got up stiffly and walked over to the kitchen counter. There was an open bag of party balloons, and right next to it a small pink tank full of helium. He grabbed a purple balloon and blew it up from the tank and brought it into the living room without tying it off. He sucked in some of the helium from the balloon and said, in a new high-pitched voice: “*See, we’ve got plenty of balloons.*”

The kids started laughing.

“Why does your voice sound like that, Grandpa?” said the girl. “It sounds all squeaky.”

“It’s helium,” said Grandpa, his voice normal again.

“What’s *hee-lee-um?*” said the boy.

“It’s like air, only lighter. That’s why the balloons float.”

He filled the balloon back up from the tank, tied it off, and slapped it over to where the kids were in the living room, giving them a wink. Vern sat back down, saw the game was as good as over, and flicked off the T.V.

“Grandpa, show us how to fill up the balloons with *hee-lee-um*,” said the boy.

“Yeah, show us how to make the balloons float, Grandpa Vern,” said the girl.

“You’re going to make me get back up? I just sat down.”

“*Pa-leeaaase*,” they said in unison.

“Well, alright.” Vern got up from his recliner and walked over to the kitchen. He could feel a little tightness in his chest but did his best to ignore it. It happened all the time, and he knew that going through two packs of Camels a day wasn’t helping.

Vern picked up the pink tank of helium from the kitchen counter and put it on the floor so the kids could get to it, then grabbed the bag of balloons and gave it to the girl. She grabbed a white balloon out of the bag, and her brother grabbed a red one.

“Okay, so you see this little spout on the can? You wrap the end of the balloon around that, then you turn this knob until the balloon gets nice and big.” He grabbed a balloon to show them. “See, but you can’t blow it up too big because then you can’t tie the knot at the end.” He demonstrated by tying the knot and letting the balloon float up to the ceiling. “Okay, now you try.”

Carly tried first. She got the balloon hooked on, but when she tried to tie it off she lost her grip and the balloon flew through the air, letting out a noise like a long fart. This made Reese giggle. She gave him a mean look.

“That’s okay. Give your brother a turn now. You can try again after.”

Reese hooked his red balloon to the spout and filled it up.

“Now, don’t get it too big or you won’t be able to make a knot at the end. And don’t let it go.”

Vern watched as Reese took a hold of the balloon and stretched the rubber around his fingers. Finally, he managed to get a good knot at the end and let it go.

“There you go, kid, that’s it,” said Vern. The kid smiled up at him.

“Let me try again,” said the girl.

“Okay, go for it,” said Vern.

She went over to where her little white balloon had landed on the kitchen floor. This time she managed to keep a hold of the balloon and managed to tie a knot at the end, just like her brother.

“Good job, kiddo,” said Vern. He decided to celebrate their accomplishment by grabbing the Jim Beam out of the cupboard and taking a quick pull.

“Alright, you kids want to go to the park, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, the park!” they said.

There were several families at the park with different aged kids.

“Stay where I can see you,” said Vern to the kids as he took a seat on a bench next to a woman in her mid-thirties. She had dark hair and was dressed in a puffy coat and knit cap.

“Those your grandkids?” she said.

“Afraid so,” he said, letting out a laugh.

“Twins?”

“Yeah. Two little red-headed devils.”

He watched as they raced to the top of the slide. He pulled out another Camel and lit it.

“Do you mind?” said the woman.

Vern looked at her, puzzled.

“The smoke. Would you mind doing that somewhere else?”

“Shit lady, it’s a free country. If you don’t like it, go somewhere else.”

“Jesus.” She got up and yelled for her kid. “Schenley, it’s time to go.”

“But mommy, I want to stay.” He started to throw a fit.

She glared at Vern from over her shoulder as they walked away. He sat, unmoved, smoking, and watched her round ass move away from him as she left the park. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been with a woman; he wasn’t sure if he could even get the equipment working right down there.

“Grandpa, Grandpa,” said the twins, running toward him.

“Yeah?”

“That little chubby kid over there said that balloons can make you fly,” said the girl.

“He said that if you tie enough balloons to something, it’ll float up to heaven,” said the girl.

“Oh yeah? That little chubby kid over there said that?”

“Yeah, is it true?”

Vern sat there, puffing and smiling. “What do you kids think?”

The girl looked thoughtful. “I think with enough balloons, you probably could.”

“Yeah, you’d need like a hundred balloons,” said the boy.

Vern laughed and started coughing. He could feel his chest tighten up again.

“Alright kids, let’s head home. Grandpa needs his medicine.” He stood up, trying to catch his breath.

It was late afternoon when they got back to the house, but the sun was still shining brightly in the autumn sky. Vern got the kids quickly into the house and went for the medicine cabinet where his heart medication. He popped open the orange bottle, took out three pills, threw them into his mouth, and washed them down with some water from the bathroom sink.

“Are you okay, Grandpa?” said the girl, peeking her head through the bathroom door.

“I’ll be okay,” said Vern. “I just needed my medicine.” He looked at her little freckled face and into her little green eyes. He loved those green eyes, and knew she would be a beautiful woman some day. She was a good cookie. He tried to smile. “Can you get Grandpa’s yellow lawn chair from the closet over there and put it out in the front yard? I want to sit and enjoy some of this sunshine with you kids.”

He stood at the kitchen counter catching his breath as the kids fumbled with his folding lawn chair. They managed to get it out of the closet and scuffed the wall with the arm-rest as they worked it past the screen door and out into the yard. He tried to take deep breaths. That’s what the doctor had told him to do at his last checkup. Try counting ten deep, full breaths, he thought. Somehow, he couldn’t get there without coughing. He took a red handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped the sweat off of his face, and felt the craving for another cigarette. “You stupid old fart,” he whispered to himself as he walked outside.

The kids were playing in the grass next to the lawn chair. They had tied some string to two balloons and let one of them go; the other was tied to the arm-rest of the lawn chair.

“Look at the balloon go, Grandpa,” said the girl.

“Look how high it is,” said the boy.

Vern watched his grandkids sweetly as they watched the red balloon get smaller and smaller. Soon it was out of sight.

“It’s gone,” said the little girl.

“Gone, up to heaven,” said the little boy.

Vern felt his chest get tight again and started coughing. He felt his whole body get hot, and his arms and legs went numb. He thought he saw flashes of light then couldn’t see anything at all. He thought of his wife on their wedding day, the birth of his only daughter, and his grandkids and their innocent, loving green eyes. He let out a long sigh with a series of coughs, then settled back into the chair.

“Are you okay Grandpa?” said the girl.

“What’s wrong with Grandpa?” said the boy.

They tried shaking him, but his body was limp. His eyes were barely open; just two little slits of empty light. The boy started to cry.

The girl wanted to cry too but held it in. She put her head on Grandpa Vern’s chest and listened. There was no sound, and his chest wasn’t moving. She felt herself start to cry, and held her brother. After a few minutes they were done and wiped away their tears.

“Do you think we can send Grandpa to heaven?” said the boy.

“Maybe.”

They went inside and started filling up balloons from the pink tank, which was still sitting on the kitchen floor. They had all manner of colors; red, blue, green, and white. They tied string to them and took them outside to the front lawn where they tied them to Grandpa’s yellow lawn chair.

“Do we have enough?” said the boy, who felt like he might cry again.

“I don’t know,” said the girl.

They had close to twenty balloons tied to Grandpa's lawnchair before the bag was empty. Nothing happened; the lawnchair didn't move. It didn't float up to heaven. The boy began to cry and went over to his sister, who held him.

"It's okay," she said. "We did our best. Grandpa knows we did our best to get him up to heaven."

"I guess so," he sobbed.

The twins sat on the grass next to their Grandpa as the sun began to sink behind the hill and the cool wind rushed through the trees. Not too far away, someone mowed their lawn.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story wasn't particularly inspired by anything. I came up with it on a Sunday night while zoning out with the T.V. on. It's relatively derivative of the Pixar movie Up if David Lynch directed it, rewriting the script with the help of Stephen King. My intention with the story was to mix absurdity with dark humor and dirty realism and to experiment with relatively normal characters (mine tend to be pretty messed up). The stylistic influences in this piece correspond to these elements, namely the absurdity of Etgar Keret, the dark humor of Céline and Henry Miller, and the dirty realism of Raymond Carver and Bukowski.*

BIO: *Duncan Ros lives in the Pacific Northwest and works as a railcar mechanic. His writing has appeared in several online music publications. His first work of fiction appeared in The Dark City Mystery Magazine. This is his second published short story.*