

I looked up to see a figure standing on top of the metal tower at the far end of the bridge. He looked like a thin man with fair skin and short blonde hair, and though I couldn't see his expression from so far away, I got the impression of incredible excitement. Like something was vibrating within him, an emotional resonance so profound and so powerful, it was ill suited for such a small, indistinct form like the human body. He turned to look at me. Did he sense that I had been watching him, or was it coincidence?

The balloon festival drew throngs to the bridge. They lined up and angled to get the best view of the colourful shapes which dominated the morning sky. Some were carefully crafted to resemble cartoon characters, mascots, or even real people; filled with air and untethered from their cables, they almost mirrored the crowd with how numerous and bunched together they were. People made a game of spotting their favourites, and the more devoted balloon lovers took notes, and argued whether the inflated effigies were as good as last year.

"Isn't that from one of the Mario games?" My friend nudged me. He knew I was a fan of the Mario series, in no small part due to their incidental stoking of my... less public interests. He was right in his assumption, and my eyes drew towards a yellow balloon with a bold white P on its front. In the games, this balloon gave Mario the power of self-inflation. As a child, finding that power up gave me odd feelings. I replayed the level where it was easiest to obtain the P-Balloon, and didn't understand the strange tingling between my legs whenever Mario puffed up and bounced. I found myself wishing he grew bigger; I wished the P-Balloon was real.

And evidently, so did the blonde man on the tower. He jumped to cries of shock from the crowd. His slim body impacted the supple yellow latex of the enormous sphere, and disappeared as it folded over him and swallowed him. He only vanished for a second, however, before the P-Balloon exploded with hurricane force and I was knocked from my standing position. I was a heavy, proudly fat, man with a balloon like roundness to my body. I wasn't easily moved, so that should give an indication as to how powerful the blast was; my friend was a stick, and he landed further back.

"Oh my god, look!" Someone cried.

"That can't be human."

"But it has a human face, and it's grinning."

"It's going to explode if it gets any bigger!"

“He’s gonna blow!”

“... I think I went to school with that guy, huh, always gotta watch the quiet ones.”

The blonde man from before loomed above the bridge. He eclipsed the sun with his body, as round and as filled to the brim with pressure as the P-Balloon. Only bigger. His body was not a perfect sphere, but close enough that no one could confuse him for anything other than what he was in the moment; an enormous balloon.

“Everyone look at me!” He bellowed. I don’t know what he sounded like before his transformation, but I was sure he didn’t have a voice deep enough to project its bass through my bones. With a depth of tone and a slow, methodical cadence that implied his words had to be chosen carefully, I stared at his plump face utterly transfixed by his beauty. When he moved his lips and drew air to speak, he did so with visible strain. His cheeks were as big as hot air balloons, smooched against a giant’s face that was still dwarfed by the disproportionate fullness of those facial balloons.

“I used to be mocked for my size, for being too small, too little, but who’s laughing now?” He laughed, and with every bellow of laughter, his body creaked and the round tyre like protrusions which I presumed to be his inflated arms and legs, sunk deeper. He was becoming more and more like a sphere, his head saved from sinking into his body by those same unwieldy cheeks and a fat double chin with a frog-like fullness. The thought that he might be afraid, or a victim of some cruel circumstance, was dispelled by the immense self-satisfaction he projected with his cartoonish grin.

“Now I’m the largest man, no, the largest balloon... no... **THE LARGEST LIVING HUMAN BALLOON, IN THE WORLD,**” his laughter melded with the peal of thunder his body produced, as it swelled against the metal towers of the bridge and for a moment everyone held their breath. Fearing that this unnamed man would suffer the inevitable fate of every balloon which grew too large.

“Why do you all look so scared?” He said. “A sharp corner isn’t enough to **BURST** a **BALLOON** as **BIG** and **BEAUTIFUL** as **ME!**”

His smile became sinister, crazed, and he opened his mouth to inhale with a level of focus I had never seen in a human. Let alone a human balloon. As he sucked in air like a vacuum, his shadow growing to darken the entire bridge, leaving us in his man-made darkness. His skin was stretched so tight we saw through him; the sun tinted a peachy colour through his hollow body. Though we could no longer see his face as he substituted the azure sky for his groaning expanse, I knew his face would return to that insane, prideful smile once he finished inhaling.

That is. If he didn't explode first.

And I was resolved to watch until he did.