

Pages 17 through 19 of *The Balloonists*:

My father told us stories every night about strange little animals that came out in the dark. When my father was away, my mother read us fairy tales that always ended in marriage. Sometimes, when I missed my father, I slept under my bed in mourning and the mice crawled all around me.

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I stand at the window of a bridal shop where huge dresses hang ghostly in the dark. At the back is a collection of veils like a row of sleeping jellyfish. One whole wall of the shop is a mass of white cloth. The wedding dresses are enormous. They are twice as big as me, and bigger than any woman on the street.

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This is the year that everyone is trying to fly around the world in a balloon. I don't know why.

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*I wonder what my generation will do with what we know of marriage.*

*I think of a married person as a kind of specialist. It's tempting to have faith in specialists—to assume that barbers know the essential properties of hair and have studied it so thoroughly that they can predict exactly how it will fall. But not all barbers are experts or artists or scientists of hair. More often they are just people, not particularly interested in hair, who somehow ended up working with it. One hairdresser mentioned to me, while he cut my hair, that he was considering turning the salon into a burger joint. He wouldn't mind flipping burgers, he said, he just wanted to be doing something with his hands. It's possible, I suppose, that all those married couples are just people, not especially interested in intimacy, who somehow ended up married.*

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I think it started with model airplanes, the little paper ones. Dad would make complicated adjustments to the wings, the tail, the nose . . . He would explain everything he was doing while we tried to make grass whistle between our thumbs. Then we would shoot the planes, with rubber bands, off the top of the hill we lived on. If it was a good flight Dad would yell and jump and race after it, and if it crashed he would pick it up and bend the wings a little more.

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Then he built a bigger plane, a remote controlled plane. Its wings were as wide as my arm span, and in the first seconds of its first flight it crashed into messy splinters.

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I bring home the newspaper for the photos of disasters. Flat, anonymous flood plains are scattered across my floor. Mashed cars with no caption are crumpled in the drawer with my clothes. I tack the thin dribble of wrecked train cars to my wall.

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I am beginning to discover everything that I will never be able to do. I realize today, for example, that I will never be a firefighter. I saw an advertisement for firefighters, “no experience necessary,” and imagined myself in front of a wall of flame. I would want to watch it burn.

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