

From 'Enduring Love'

Ian McEwan

A mighty fist of wind socked the balloon in two rapid blows, one-two, the second more vicious than the first. It jerked Gadd right out of the basket on to the ground, and with Gadd's considerable weight removed from the equation, it lifted the balloon five feet or so, straight into the air. The rope ran through my grip, scorching my palms, but I managed to keep hold, with two feet of line spare. The others kept hold too. The basket was right above our heads now, and we stood with arms upraised like Sunday bell ringers. Into our amazed silence, before the shouting could resume, the second punch came and knocked the balloon up and westwards. Suddenly we were treading the air with all our weight in the grip of our fists.

Those one or two ungrounded seconds occupy as much space in memory as might a long journey up an unchartered river. My first impulse was to hang on in order to keep the balloon weighted down. The child was incapable, and was about to be borne away. Two miles to the left were high-voltage power lines. A child alone and needing help. It was my duty to hang on, and I thought we would all do the same.

Almost simultaneous with the desire to stay on the rope and save the boy came other thoughts of self-preservation and fear. We were rising, and the ground was dropping away as the balloon was pushed westwards. I knew I had to get my legs and feet locked round the rope. But the end of the line barely reached below my waist and my grip was slipping. My legs flailed in the empty air. Every fraction of a second that passed increased the drop, and the point must come when to let go would be impossible or fatal. Then, someone did let go. Immediately, the balloon and its hangers on lurched upwards another several feet.

Because letting go was in our nature too. Selfishness is also written on our hearts. Mostly, we are good when it makes sense. A good society is one that makes sense of being good. Suddenly, hanging there below the basket, we were a bad society, we were disintegrating. Suddenly the sensible choice was to look out for yourself. The child was not my child, and I was not going to die for it. Then I glimpsed another body fall away and I felt the balloon lurch upwards. The matter was settled. Altruism had no place. Being good made no sense. I let go and fell, I reckon, about twelve feet. I landed heavily on my side, I got away with a bruised thigh. Around me - before or after, I'm not so sure - bodies were thumping to the ground.

By the time I got to my feet the balloon was fifty yards away, and one man was still dangling by his rope. When I stood up and saw him, he was one hundred feet, and rising, just where the ground itself was falling. He wasn't struggling, he wasn't kicking or trying to claw his way up. He hung perfectly still along the line of his rope, all his energies concentrated in his weakening grip. He was already a tiny figure almost black against the sky and as the balloon and its basket lifted away and westwards, the smaller he became and the more terrible it was.

Our silence was a kind of acceptance, a death warrant. Or it was horrified shame. He had been on the rope so long that I began to think he might stay there until the balloon drifted down. But even as I had that hope we saw him slip down right to the end of the rope. And still he hung there. For two seconds, three, four. And then he let go and ruthless gravity played its part. And from

somewhere a thin squawk cut through the stilled air. He fell as he had hung, a stiff little black stick. I've never seen such a terrible thing as that falling man.