

AMID THE FLOWERS: A YEAR AT MINIMUM WAGE  
ANNE SAKER

Once a week, at a minimum, a dad or a mom arrived at the floral department, eyes burning with that blue flame of fear: kid's birthday party for twelve in an hour, got the cake, candles, gift bags, but no balloons, can't have a party without balloons, been searching everywhere, Party City, Party Town, Party Subdivision, no luck, and so, (please, o merciful god), "Do you have any helium?"

Only by working at Kroger for minimum wage did I learn that the world was suffering from a commercial shortage of the second-most abundant element in the observable universe.

I had heard about this problem from Maria and from enough customers that I did a little reporting. In 1996, the United States dumped the Bush Dome Federal Helium Reserve, which glutted the market and so depressed the price that natural-gas companies stopped capturing helium, which was a by-product of the drilling process. Nearly twenty years later, a helium shortage has driven up the price, which in turn has pushed up medical and research costs, since equipment such as lasers and magnetic resonance imaging machines need helium to operate, and laboratories use helium to run other delicate instruments. Scientists say posterity will curse the waste of a precious resource on party balloons.

Because of the shortage, most stores that used to blow up balloons with helium no longer have the budget for the gas. But with its overwhelming purchasing muscle, Kroger not only has helium, it has a fun little monopoly on helium. The floral department got a weekly delivery of two five-foot metal tanks, which stood in a nook near the cash register connected to a pressure controller. A tube from that device ran above the ceiling tile to the other end of the back counter and down to a small black box with two regulators, a low-pressure dispenser for foil balloons and another with a little more oomph for latex. We kept our eyes on the tank gauge, but we never ran out of helium, and we still blew up free Kroger balloons for little kids, who usually set them loose later to bump into the rafters over the dairy case. Deep in the Ohio winter, I also reminded buyers that with their purchase, they would experience science: Helium balloons shrink in cold air but reinflate in a warm room.

Saturdays were *crazy* balloon days, as if a large fraction of the local population awakened to start the weekend in a deep freak-out over a balloon run. Customers did not flinch at paying a buck fifty for an eleven-inch latex balloon and two ninety-nine

for a foil balloon. They bought them by the dozen . . . for a child's party, business ribbon cutting, real estate open house, five-kilometer race, school dance, sales meeting. People took them to Mason's main cemetery north of the store and released them to the sky. So I took practice in the art of inflation.

Foil balloons required little technique: Slip the tail on the regulator, press down and inflate until the surface was smooth and taut, then pinch the tail coming off the regulator to seal. Some foil balloons even came with their own ribbons attached. All I had to do was blow them up and tell the customer to step to the left to swipe a bank card. The sheer variety of foil balloons was gladdening. Maria had a giant catalog from the distributor with hundreds of choices. When the deliveries arrived, I refilled the revolving balloon display stands and marveled at the artwork and cleverness. My favorite bore a cartoon of the Grim Reaper holding a plate and fork with the words, "Relax. I'm here for the cake." Sold a lot of those.

Latex balloons, however, required some Zen. After much trial, I had acquired two important skills: the application of Hi-Float and the tie-off.

Hi-Float is an adhesive goo that coats the inside surface of the balloon and extends loft for a day or two. The additive comes in a large plastic jug with a pump. Maria showed me how to put the balloon on the jug's pump nozzle, before inflating, and give the balloon a shot. But there was a touch to it: Too much Hi-Float, and as soon as I took the balloon off the regulator, it would sputter and crash to the department floor, pathetic. One Saturday afternoon, a man brought in his own pack of six blue balloons for inflation, which we did for a confiscatory seventy-five cents a balloon. In staffing the balloon desk, I had found that not all balloons are created equal. These blue numbers were Exhibit A: The first one exploded; the next two couldn't take the Hi-Float and surrendered on takeoff. I looked over at the customer and made the command decision to comp the man replacements from the Kroger stock, which were better balloons anyway. He pronounced himself a highly satisfied customer.

But after helium inflation came the balloon tie-off. If I wasn't prepared, the little beastie squirted from my fingers and went sailing around the department until it ran out of gas and dropped to the concrete with a sigh of exhaustion. That act entertained customers once or twice, but if they were impatient, the third escapee elicited a heavy stare, come *on*, any imbecile can fill a balloon. The trick was to relax: Fill the balloon to appealing plumpness but with enough tail to wrap the end around the left index and middle fingers; pinch off the loop with the left thumb; push the end through the loop with the right index finger, pull tight, then tie on a length of curling ribbon. Maria could thread the ribbon through the loop before tightening, a Ph.D. level of

balloon management. For a tie-off practice, I inflated a dozen, and then a customer came along and bought them.

Balloons drew out stories as much as flowers. One afternoon, I ran some boxes back to The Crusher singing with Cyndi Lauper that "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" on the overhead PA and returned to the department to find a woman who wanted to get two latex balloons inflated. I asked how her gray winter day was going. Great! she said. An hour before, she learned that six years after thirty radiation treatments on her larynx, she was free of cancer. Doctor called her cured. My mouth was agape until I could sputter out congratulations. I asked if she were buying the balloons to celebrate her good news. No, she was buying them for a friend's birthday. She herself didn't need balloons: "Nothing can make me happier."

Later that shift, a father came in holding a tiny baby, four months old. I cooed at the infant as the father selected a pink, heart-shaped "It's a Girl" foil balloon. I blew it up and tied on a length of matching pink curling ribbon. The man paid for the balloon, but he didn't leave right away. He stood at the counter for a few minutes, in a quiet bubble with his little girl, bouncing the foil balloon on the ribbon so it would flash with light. Her eyes shone at the grand magic that her daddy performed just for her, and she smiled that smile without price.