

The Balloonist

by [Peter Glassman](#) (September 2023)



Red Balloon, Paul Klee, 1922

The Vietnam War was over. My role as an anesthesiologist and primary care MD was now transferred from the US Navy to civilian life. I lived in Thornwood, Massachusetts and had three young children: David 8, Michael 5, and Tracy 4. I had

both a private practice in family medicine and anesthesiology. On Saturdays, I made post-anesthesia rounds on patients who had surgery (and anesthesia) for a brief examination and discharge note. My dual medical practice left my absenteeism at home the subject of my wife Barbara's occasional complaints.

This particular Saturday, she looked tired, "Peter, you have to cut down on your practice. Just do Anesthesia and give up the GP stuff and clinical trial research."

I was in a hurry to leave the situation, "Look, I have to go to the hospital and see my post-ops and then I have the Thornwood High School Football game."

Her voice elevated in amplitude and urgency, "And that's another thing. Why do you have to be a football team doctor?"

As I was searching for a domestically tranquilizing response, my oldest boy David spoke, "Dad, why can't we go to the football game with you."

My son Michael reinforced the request. My four-year old Tracy seemed not to care but wanted to go with the boys.

I crossed my fingers and gave her a reply sure to please, "Look dear, I'll take the kids to the hospital and the football game. They can have breakfast in the cafeteria while I do my post-ops. After that we go to the football game. We'll be home by two in the afternoon. You can have a rest and relax without the turmoil of the kids."

She stared at me and then smiled, "Okay, it's a deal, but I'm going shopping by myself and will see you guys for supper." She paused and gave me a critical eye, "You make sure you keep track of Tracy. She's only four."

As I finished post-anesthesia rounds, I thought on Barb's

words. I should only have one focused practice in medicine. Well, maybe two. I can do anesthesiology and the clinical trials in pain management. Or maybe also keep the football games. Of course, my family practice is fun, so maybe I'll just continue along and keep the home fires calm with giving Barb every Saturday to herself.

I went to the cafeteria to get my kids. I bought a pediatric nurse her breakfast as payment for watching all three have their breakfast. "Thanks, Deidre, we're off to the football game."

The kids cheered, "Yay, we're goin' to the football game." Tracy cheered with the boys but probably didn't know why.

I parked my station wagon next to the mandatory ambulance and greeted the Thornwood High School coach. I waved to the players who raised their hands in the air. Our seats were a bench next to the players and the water wagon. I carried three aqua-lung-size oxygen tanks from my car. The coach came over.

"Three tanks, eh Doc. Well, it worked well last game and so far it's not illegal."

The last game, I had explained to the team players about lactic acid buildup in muscles and how giving oxygen flushes it out. It gives them a five minute burst of energy and motivation over the opposing team. We won by a large margin.

My kids were happy. I bought them cotton candy and soda. David helped the water boy. Michael talked to the coach's youngest son. Only Tracy seemed oblivious to what football was all about. She eyed the balloon man.

Tracy shouted, "I want a balloon. I want a big red balloon. Daddy, I want that one," She pointed to a large round red balloon with the word Thornwood in white letters.

I bought her the balloon and tied it to her wrist. For a few minutes she was just enamored at the helium balloon suspended above her. Tracy walked among the Thornwood team sitting on the benches showing them her balloon.

Two buses arrived carrying both the Thornwood marching band and the local newspaper reporters. My two boys were schmoozing with the football players and took their eyes away from Tracy as I met with the football coach and the ambulance personnel.

The first kickoff to the Midtown High opposition team elicited roars of excitement from the young spectator crowd. David and Michael joined with the cheers. I watched the plays hoping no serious injuries would be forthcoming. Tracy was pulling her balloon string down and smiling as she let it go watching the tethered large red sphere try to sail away above her.

Just before half-time, Thornwood had scored their second touchdown. My administration of oxygen to the Thornwood quarterback and the receivers gave them the added energy to surpass the fatiguing Midtown defense.

The Thornwood marching band formed up with the booming large drums striking a palpable cadence. I looked around for the kids. Half-time usually produced more hot-dog and cotton candy hunger. I gave David the money to get the food along with Michael and looked around for Tracy. I couldn't find her. She was nowhere to be seen.

I panicked and yelled for David and Michael to also help look for her. I recruited a few of the players who knew what she looked like to join the search.

The Thornwood Police officer at the game suggested I use the loud speaker system to summon Tracy back to the benches.

However, the Marching band was so loud no one could hear any announcements over the underpowered portable PA system.

I started fantasizing about the local papers criticizing me on losing my little daughter. My wife would never forgive me. What was I going to do?

Michael came over for more money for another hotdog. I felt desperate. I grabbed his hand, "Michael, we have to find your sister. Where did Tracy go? Did you see her with any strangers?"

Michael repeated his request for hotdog money and said, "No, she's not with any strangers." He pointed his right hand out to the football field. "She's out there."

I looked at the gridiron and there was no Tracy. "Michael, I don't see her."

He laughed, "She's with the band." He pointed again.

With great relief I saw what Michael was aiming at. The band was marching and playing a John Philip Souza March. They were in a rectangular formation. In the center of the bright-uniformed high school musicians was a large red Thornwood balloon in the air secured to something below by a string. The something below had to be Tracy. It was.

The local newspaper reporter ran with me out to the field and took pictures of me retrieving my four-year-old daughter. Both Tracy and the news lady were laughing. A picture of Tracy in the band with a short cover story made the front page on Sunday's paper. Comments by readers were all positive. Comment by my wife was not so friendly.

Barb stared at the photo, "It doesn't say you almost lost her, that for a while you couldn't find her. Now every time you go to those games with the kids I'll be a nervous wreck worrying

here at home.”

My son David solved the issue, “Okay mom, you can come to the football games with us.”

One other episode is worth mentioning. A year later I took my family to Boston to the crowded and picturesque Quincy Market. The area is resplendent with colorful banners, music, shops, and eateries too numerous to count. Once again, we lost Tracy. This time she didn't have a balloon. She got a huge red, white, and blue all day sucker lollipop instead. I was once more filled with panic.

The crowds were so thick we had to hold hands to make sure we didn't get separated in our efforts to look for little Tracy. Barb didn't seem as flustered as I was. After a half-hour of searching, we gave up. What were we going to do?

Just when we felt totally helpless, I heard a woman shouting, “Look, here comes a Boston cop on horseback.”

Another voice added, “Yeah, he has a little girl licking a giant lollipop on the chestnut horse with him.”

We ran to the horse shouting her name. Tracy saw us and waved with her lollipop.

The Officer reunited us and we had to follow Tracy, still with the horseback cop, to a field police tent.

After showing them proof-positive identification that we were her parents, they gave her to us. The mounted Officer also offered a comment and some advice. “Little Tracy here got lost but she remembered the plan her mom gave her—‘just go find a policeman if we get separated’. That was a good idea and it worked. She's some smart little girl.” He paused, “May I suggest also that you might buy her a helium balloon. You can keep an eye on it as a marker to her whereabouts.”

Barb and I looked at each other and smiled. Barb spoke with an animated grin, "Thank you Officer, that is a wonderful suggestion."

Tracy shouted, "Yay" and licked her mega-lollipop.

[Table of Contents](#)

Peter Glassman is a retired physician living in Texas, who devotes his time to writing novels and memoir-based fiction. He is the author of 14 novels including the medical thrillers *Cotter*; *The Helios Rain* and *Who Will Weep for Me*. Some of his short stories were written for presentation at the San Antonio Writers Group Meetup. You can read more about him and his books [here](#).

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