The party's over

It was only a game….

Penelope Kim Crowther

JACEY

"Tell me again about the balloons, Grandpa."

"Now? We're nearly there."

"*Pleeease*."

"Okay, okay. Well, when I was a kid we used to have balloons at our birthday parties that were filled with … helium."

"No!!!"

"Yes. And when we were done playing with them, we'd sometimes let them just drift off into the sky. Or swallow the helium to make our voices go squeaky."

"You ATE it?"

"You bet. But it was cheap back then — not like now. It wasn't till your Grandma and me were about your age that people started to realize how much helium we needed, and how we were running out. Physicists were doing more and more clever things at very cold temperatures, and they needed a lot of helium to keep things cold. But there just wasn't that much about. Do you remember where helium comes from?"

"Uh … no."

"Sophie … I've told you a hundred times. Hang on a minute, I just have to pay this road toll. There. So, all our helium is left over from when the planet first formed. It leaks out of the middle of the Earth and trickles out of the ground, and then it hangs about in our air for a while. But it's so light that eventually it spins out of the sky into outer space. Our planet leaks helium — like a pricked balloon."

"So if it just comes out of the ground, why did we run out?"

"Well it's hard to collect something when there's so little of it in the whole sky. Sucking helium out of the air is like mining a beach for lost wedding rings. Not a very good idea. The only place where there's enough of it to mine is … in oil. Oil collects helium and stores it up."

"But there isn't any oil now."

"Exactly. Back in the '20s, we were running out of oil pretty quickly and all the helium plants in Texas and Saudi Arabia were running down as fast as the oil wells were running dry. So that's why your Grandma, who was a very clever geologist, made so much money. She was young and adventurous — like you." Sophie giggled at that. "And she saw what was happening, so she went out to Nepal, where the Earth is all cracked up from earthquakes and there are places where helium leaks out in bigger streams than anywhere else on the planet. And the American company she worked for — still works for — built big buildings over these cracks so they could collect the helium. And then they sold it on."

"I'm clever too, you know."

"I know you are. Here we go — here's our turning."

"So is that why Granny still lives in the United States?"

"In a way. Your Grandma decided that all the money from that helium was more important to her than other things … which is why you get to have such nice birthday presents, even if you don't have helium-filled balloons. And that's why I moved here … to do other things instead. Now, we're here!"

Sophie looked up and saw the sign: 'ITER — the future of fusion'. She knew this place, it was where her Grandpa worked sometimes. It had a sign outside with a picture of a little explosion. Sunny rays were flying out, which was energy you could use to make your computer work, she knew. Grandpa always said this would be the next big thing, after oil. The picture showed other things flying out too, little circles labelled 'D' and 'n' and 'He'. "He who?" she wondered.

Grandpa pulled into the gravel drive and stopped the car. "Now you'll stay in the car while Grandpa has his meeting? I'll only be a little while."

Sophie waited until she saw him go inside the gate, and then the doors. Then she got the birthday present out of her bag and gave it a little shake. Grandma had given it to her the week before, and told her it was a surprise for the man who ran ITER. She was supposed to hide it, that was the game, while Grandpa was at his meeting, but not to tell anyone. Sophie liked surprises. Beneath the wrapping and the bows the present ticked like a clock. She got out and hid it in the bushes by the gates, and went back to wait.

They didn't feel the explosion ten hours later, when they were safely back in the flat having tea. Not until Grandpa turned on the news the next morning did Sophie see the building on fire, big billows of black smoke heading for the sky. She could hear the reporter over the sound of sirens: "…This will put back fusion research for years. On the eve of a demonstration project that was meant to prove to the world the reality of cheaper, cleaner energy, there is only smoke to show for decades of…"

Sophie didn't understand what was going on. Or why Grandpa had his head in his hands. Was he crying? The newscast went on: "In related news, the price of helium jumped sky high today as the potential source from fusion plants dried up — for decades now at least…" ■

Penelope Kim Crowther is a journalist and occasional writer of fiction, who tries very hard not to muddle up her genres.