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Happy Birthdays

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My Dad has two birthdays and one of them is today. I sit in the back of the room on a white folding chair with a dent in the middle. Styrofoam coffee cups collect underneath chairs, some of them stained with red lipstick. The man on my left wears a plaid golfing hat, and his hands are folded in his lap. They look like kind hands, the type of hands that would feed pigeons at the park, but they have that familiar tremor. On my right, Dad slouches back in his chair with his ankle propped on his knee. He has those same blue Nikes on, with no socks, and his shirt is unbuttoned down to his navel, revealing his thick gray and black chest hairs. “I'm going outside to have a cigarette,” he whispers, and he leaves me in the crowded chapel of the community church, alone with the listening faces who watch the speaker as if he were a minister. I shut my eyes and slouch in my chair, the dent changing form as I shift my weight.

When we were little, my sister and I couldn’t figure out if our parents had ever actually gotten married. My mother had kept an album of her whole courtship with Dad, but there were no pictures of the actual wedding. The only person we knew of that even went to the ceremony was my grandmother, and she had never provided us with any useful details. Mom said that they had got engaged on a Friday and then had the wedding on the following Saturday, in a Catholic church, of course. She told us that she wore a stylish green suit and that she was two hours late because her hair wasn’t working right. But she finally made it to the church, married Dad, and they both went back to work on Monday. Dad said that they got engaged on a Sunday and then had the wedding on the next Saturday. He confirmed the green suit, but claimed that he was the one who was two hours late because he had been having doubts.
It seemed to me and my sister that with something as important as a wedding, people would remember the details, especially the people who got married. But that was all they would tell us, and we were left to fill in the holes ourselves. No pictures, no reception, no reliable witnesses. The only real proof we had was that Mom went by Mrs. Keeley, so they must have eventually had a legal ceremony. Perhaps they both regretted it too much to want to remember what had really happened.

Anyway, we have never figured out how it all really happened. So, instead, we tried to figure out how they met. Mom said that she asked Dad to dance at a nightclub and he said no. Nobody had ever said no to her before, so she made up her mind that she wanted Dad. Dad said that he didn't remember anything, except that he was drunk that night, and every night after that until they got divorced. I think he must remember more than that.

The plaid-golfing-hat man shifts in his chair and I open my eyes. Everyone is quiet and my chair is so slippery stiff. I look out the window and I can see my dad pinching the end of his cigarette between his thumb and index finger, and puffing smoke into the thick blanket of night air. His cigarette drops to the ground and his blue Nike crushes it out. He is talking with a yellow-haired man, and they seem to be laughing. I hope that he will come back inside now, but he reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out another cigarette. Dad's hands always seem to collect the energy of his whole body when he is trying to make a point, and I can see his fingers harden and spread as he makes wild gestures while talking with the man. The yellow-haired man gives him a light; I pull my knees up to my chest and rest my head against them.

The night before Dad's thirty-fifth birthday, my sister Colleen and I made him a cake. The next morning I couldn't find anything to wear to school, so I
threw a tantrum on the floor, my face big and red and wet with frustration. Dad heard the tantrum and flung open my door; the doorknob broke through the wall and made a hole. He charged over to my chest of drawers, and I could smell a layer of whiskey on his breath.

He started with the bottom drawer and worked his way up, yanking each white-wicker drawer out of the chest and turning it upside down. My clothes fell silently to the floor, and he tossed the empty drawers onto my bed, scattering splinters and chunks of wood onto my Holly Hobby bedspread. All six of the drawers fought for a spot on my bed, and my clothes lay in a lopsided mountain on the floor.

His face still red and flaming, he went after the closet. The wire hangers bounced off the rack as he snatched the clothes and added them to the clumsy mountain on the floor. Satisfied by turning my closet into an empty cave, he let out a sigh of triumph and headed for the door, but it was stuck. With the doorknob wedged deep in the wall, he had to brace his blue Nike on the door frame as he struggled to dislodge it. The door slammed behind him, and I sat between my bed and the wall staring at the remains of my room. I stared at the hole, the empty closet and the flattening mounds of clothes. There was a piece of wall hanging onto the edge of the hole, like the lid on an opened can of soup, gently swaying from the force of the slammed door. I didn’t present the cake to him that night. I wouldn’t even say Happy Birthday.

The back door of the church quietly closes, and Dad’s Nikes quack against the floor as he steps up beside me and taps me on the shoulder. “Are you bored,” he asks, “because we can leave early?”

“No,” I lie, “but I don’t see why you bother coming if you just go outside and smoke.” He looks down at the floor and doesn’t answer. Careful not to spill his fresh cup of coffee, he sits down and leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his large stomach spreading over his thighs. He taps his fingers on the side of his cup and takes heavy, strained breaths. “Do they give all the birthday people a piece of cake?” I ask him. Lightly patting his belly, he whispers, “Only for special people like me. You know what I always say, I have bulimia, I just don’t throw up.” He laughs his short, breathy laugh, and I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes. Maybe he wants to feel needed again.

At first we were glad that he was gone, because things were more peaceful. But Colleen started to miss him after a few weeks. After all, he had never dumped
all of her clothes on the floor, so why shouldn't they be close? Mom wasn't doing so well either; she would still be working on the same English muffin when I left for school. Each bite of the limp bread produced a weak crunch from sunken butter. Finally, Colleen just got up one day and moved in with Dad, leaving me alone to deal with Mom.

On my twelfth birthday, I woke to find that Dad had been in the house the night before. He had been in the kitchen and had left me some things. Nail polish, earrings, some q-tips and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide were laid out on the table, with a note next to them that said, For Shannon, Happy Birthday. I didn't know why he picked those things; I didn't even have pierced ears! I gathered them up and took them into my bedroom, putting all the gifts, except the earrings, into my top drawer; I didn't know if I was hiding them or saving them, but I stuffed them under my clothes.

I took the earrings over to his hole, the hole that he had made in my wall, and dropped them in. They made a 'ping' as they hit the floor. Peering down the hole into the hollow of my wall, I suddenly wanted the earrings back. After all, I had been thinking about piercing my ears soon, and they would come in handy. And they were a present, and he probably took time to pick them out, maybe he even asked a sales-lady for advice. And he did come all the way over here to give them to me. But it was too late. They were stuck inside the flaking wall.

The first group of people are seated on the stage, and the speaker invites those with six to ten year birthdays to join them. Dad stands up and straightens his shirt, buttoning a few buttons but still leaving space for a tuft of hair to pop out of the top. Each person is introduced individually, and each person takes a little bit longer to tell his or her story. Dad is last in line, but finally, it's his turn.

"My name is Tom, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi Tom," I say.

But I wanted to say, "Hi Dad."

They hand him a gold medallion with the AA symbol on it, and even from the back row I can see his fingers trace its edges. It is his tenth birthday today: ten years of sobriety, and ten years since his red station wagon pulled out of our garage for good. He stands around the birthday cake with the other members who
are celebrating birthdays, and everyone starts to sing *Happy Birthday*. I sing too... I sing the loudest.

I had been wanting to ask him about things since he had first become sober. I thought that he might be more willing to tell me about the wedding, about the past, and then I could have put the whole story together, in proper order. But none of that seems to matter now as Dad leans over to blow out the candles. The glow from the flame casts a spotlight on his aging face.

*God grant me the serenity to accept*

*the things I cannot change*

*The courage to change the things I can*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

We say the words as an audience. My dad and I, we say them together. I need it too, maybe more than him. I need the serenity to grow closer to him as he is, the courage to accept him as he was, but most of all the wisdom to know the difference between what he was and what he is now. He was, is, and always will be an alcoholic. Just as he was, is and always will be my dad. What he is now, a man standing on the stage and cutting himself a generous portion of cake, is not what he was then; he is not the man I made a cake for on his thirty-fifth birthday.

He returns to his seat, and his chubby fingers fumble behind his neck as he unlatches the thick, gold chain. The silver, five-year medallion slips off the chain and falls into his lap, and he puts the gold one on. His hands clasp tightly around the silver piece, fingers interlocked, draining to white.

"This is for you," he says, and he hands the silver medallion to me. It is still warm and moist from being in his hand.

Shannon Keeley, a senior studying English, is from Irvine, California. If cornered, Shannon will tell you that, given the choice, she'd have preferred to remain in the 80's.