

Eight Candles in September

The house is still, the structure braced for the influx of children. A single swarm of child-like energy moves across our front yard like a weather system--dancing, tumbling, singing, with wild celebration in wide eyes. I prop myself against the living room wall and wait, hoping to absorb the cool solidity from plaster. I listen to the laughter of my friends running through the yard. Their high pitched chatter grows louder as they approach the front door.

I am a loosened thread on the fringes of this birthday tapestry; even though I'm supposed to be the center of the weave. I see peripherally the colors of Indian summer shorts and birthday hats swirling around me, but I am entranced by the darkness behind color, a pigment clashing with neon orange and blue balloons and shiny purple birthday plates. I know now that there is darkness beneath color. So, silent with this secret, I move through birthday motions with muscle memory.

My name is laced between the plump, pasty roses on the white sheet cake my mother bought from the Giant Open Air Supermarket. The bold, bright ribbons on packages of all sizes and shapes hold birthday promises in their glisten. Every relative within miles kneels down close to me, their smiles carving deep crevices around their eyes. Through wide grins, their lips uncover silver fillings and receding gums. They smell like blankets left in closets. When it takes too much strength for me to look up at them, I look down to my Converse All Stars sneakers, hoping when I look up again, they will be gone.

On this September day, I become an eight year old.

The setting sun releases crickets, and the sweet wet grass invites tug-of-war and dodgeball. I try to play, groping for the movement that will save me from the ball, but I feel as if I'm sinking in the dew. I can not divert my body from the oncoming orange of the volleyball and am reminded of my weakness when the impact takes my breath.

I know, while aimless in tumultuous play, that my mother stands in the kitchen's fluorescent glow, contemplating the movement of her fingers placing candles on the cake. With even, ceremonial gestures, she pushes rigid sticks of blue and pink and yellow wax just below the icing, to the quick of the cake. Is she thinking with each thin candle what these eight years were to her?: thrust into unplanned motherhood, pushed deeper into wifedom, these hoods hanging darkly over her--hiding paths she might have taken, hiding beauty in and from her eyes. Was she thinking how long it had been since she laughed and meant it? Her silence sinks beneath the pleasant pastel colors of the candles to the core, the wick, the truth of what these eight years are for her.

The others don't yell at me for not playing; they don't even tell me to get out of the way. Their movement is brisk and light, propelled by childhood energy; but I stand awkwardly among them. I see only their happy forms peripherally, their faces shaded by my knowledge of a darker truth. Their screams and cheers bounce across the new-mown yard like bird calls, then amplify and rise above the oaks. When one among them falls, they laugh with their entire bodies.

Do they see my stillness? How much can they know about the silence of my house? How many saw the brown paper grocery bag filled with my father's underwear and shaving cream by the front door?

Shortly before the candles are lit, the bag is gone. The rattle from the precarious muffler of my father's Datsun B210 is loud in the driveway, then fades as he drives down the street and turns the corner out of view.

I still hear it when smiling faces sing. I still hear it when I close my eyes to make a wish. And after extinguishing every candle with an exhausting breath, a breath heavy with hope...I still hear it. The smoke pinches my eyes when I open them to see that nothing has changed and everything has changed on this day that I turn eight.

Shortly before the sticky squares of white are placed on plastic plates, my dad has found a home in a motel room.

Shortly before the Neapolitan ice cream is dished by soft, manicured hands, I see him lighting a joint with calloused, bitten fingers, watching the smoke seductively circle his head, listening to paper burn as he sucks in, then breathing the dance deep into his chest, and letting out only what will not remain inside.

Pouring Hawaiian Punch and coffee, my mother is as sweet as the sugar-shortening frosted cake—the perfect hostess. She tucks away her sadness so deep behind her eyes, she loses touch with it herself. She weaves among the relatives and children, the strongest thread, touching each stitch to hold the piece together, to prevent my birthday from shredding at the seams.

But though the living room resonates with familiar voices and the rise and fall of laughter, I can only hear the clanging of my father's Datsun down the street. I can only see the empty places in our house.

The plastic fork feels heavy in my hands. The small bite fills my entire mouth, and the sweetness coats my tongue. I chew to stop my lips from twisting to the contorted position of a

cry. I force my mouth into movement, chewing harder to work loose the tightness of the jaw just before the tears.

This September night, I try to act with the grace and expertise of my seasoned mother. I wear surprise and excitement like a pinafore as I strip the color from each gift. I work hard to speak quickly with enthusiastic pitches, but secretly censor every word so as not to stumble on my sadness. I wear the mask of my inheritance, an heirloom of facades. For this moment, I am my mother's understudy. But the latex of this visage makes me hot and sweaty underneath. And when the house is drained of guests, I am eager to emerge from my suffocating disguise and breathe in steady tempo.

But my mother isn't. In the quiet of the kitchen, she washes remnants of the evening from coffee cups. I watch her back and neck rise and fall with laden breath. I lack the courage to confess my pain for fear of reminding her of hers.

We roll into the waves of routine and lose our footing. On separate floors, we brush our teeth and wash our faces while we listen to each other through the plumbing. We never speak about the silence in our house. We move quickly. We are so busy: no time to listen; no time to talk.

And after all is in its place—the dishes, towels, and coffee cups—we speed to sleep and use illusions as our blankets on that hot September night.