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Happy Birthday

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY

It was a Saturday, and I was a sophomore in high school. I was sprawled on the couch with a bag of chips, watching television, and I had one hell of a hangover. I heard the door from the garage open and close and my father walk in. Without even turning around I knew it was him. He'd been outside, pruning the bushes or something.

"Chris, don't you think you ought to start getting ready for tonight?" he said, walking into the kitchen.

I didn't answer. I could hear him fixing himself a drink. Probably a gin and tonic. That's what he always drank.

"Chris, did you hear me? I'd like to leave in about an hour. And do me a favor, put on some decent clothes. Try not to look like a slob."

I hesitated, then said, "I don't think I'm going. There's a big party tonight. Everyone's gonna be there."

My father was now standing over me, drink in hand. I was right, gin and tonic. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye so I stared at the television instead.

"Whoa, wait a minute," he said sternly, his voice a bit louder now. "I thought we settled this the other night. Your grandfather is very sick. You may never see him again. Today's his birthday and we're all going up to see him, including you. I don't think that's asking too much, do you?"

For some reason he always expected an answer to questions I considered rhetorical. Still I said nothing, just stared at the television.

"Well, do you?"

I got up from the couch, brushed past him, and headed for the kitchen.

"Where do you think you're going?" he yelled after me. "Don't you walk away when I'm talking to you!"

By this time I had reached the stairs.

"You know it's about time you started thinking about someone besides yourself!"

I wondered who he had been thinking about Thursday night. Certainly not his wife. Certainly not his family.

As I reached the top of the stairs I glanced into the master bedroom. My mother was asleep. She'd said she had a headache.

I went into the bathroom and flicked on the vent. My pipe was under the sink where I always kept it. There was still some weed left in the bowl from last night, so I took a hit, inhaled and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. My father was at the bottom of the stairs, yelling something about getting ready on time. I thought about Thursday night. Actually it was Friday morning, since it was well after midnight. I was awakened by the shouting downstairs. My parents were arguing in the kitchen, where they always argued, only this time my mother was doing most of the yelling. Something shattered, like a glass, then another. My heart beat faster. It sounded like a struggle. Mom yelled "You son-of-a-bitch!" and my father cried out in pain. Mom was sobbing as she came up the stairs a few minutes later. I assume my father slept on the couch.

My sister was 24 at the time and living on her own. My mother would always confide in her after a fight. She was someone to talk to. I called her on Friday to see what had happened. It seems my father hadn't been working late Thursday night after all. Mom called the office and there was no answer. She waited up. He came home drunk, not smelling entirely masculine. That's how the fight started. Mom hit him in the face. That's how it ended.

Now it was off to grandmother's house, as though nothing had happened. My parents were always trying to conceal their marital problems from our relatives, but I think everyone knew just the same.

Why'd the old man's birthday have to fall on a Saturday for chrissakes. Any day but a Saturday. Or a Friday. My weekends were sacred. I didn't even like the old man that much. I mean, we'd never had any kind of confrontation or anything, but I'd always found him cold, hard to get close to.

And he was a penny-pincher too. I remember how carefully he used to open his presents at Christmas, so as not to rip the wrapping paper. This way he could reuse it for the next holi-

day. I mean, how much does a roll of wrapping paper cost? \$1.50? \$2.00? Jesus. I remember my tenth birthday. I was talking to my grandmother on the phone, and I could hear him yelling in the background, "Put it in a letter, will ya! You're running up the goddam bill!"

Now it was his birthday, and I'd had to cancel my Saturday night plans to go see him.

Ever since I'd gotten my license my parents made me drive anytime we went somewhere as a family. My father was riding shotgun and Mom was sitting alone in the back seat. No one said anything for a while. The road was damp and the fallen leaves were matted to it. My headlights stabbed the darkness.

"You going to get your hair cut one of these days like I asked you to?" my father said finally.

I kept my eyes fixed on the road. "Yeah."

"Yeah what?"

"Yeah I'm going to get my hair cut," I said, irritated.

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon."

There was silence for a couple minutes.

"Oh no." Mom sounded worried. "Chris, I think I may have left the iron on. We better go back and check."

I sighed and started to slow down.

"No, we're late as it is," my father said. "We don't have time."

I hated being caught in the middle.

"Fine," Mom said. "Let the house burn down."

"No, I walked right by the iron. I'm pretty sure it was unplugged," my father said.

"You're right. Just forget it."

It was my father's turn to sigh. I clicked on the radio, trying to avert any further discussion about the iron. Zeppelin. "When the Levee Breaks." I knew the words and I started to sing to myself: "If it keeps on raining th-"

"Do we have to listen to this?" my mother interrupted suddenly. "It's giving me a headache."

"You heard your mother, Chris. She's not feeling well."

I started to say something but stopped myself, clicking off the radio instead. I glanced over at my father and wondered

how he was going to explain that black eye to his parents.

My grandmother seemed in good spirits, and she hugged each of us as we entered.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, pulling back from my father in mid-hug. "What did you do to your eye?"

"Oh, it's nothing Mom. I just hit myself with a two-by-four at the lumber yard."

Good one, Dad, I thought. I couldn't tell if my grandmother bought it or not.

"Oh my. Did you go to the emergency room? You never can tell."

"No, I think it'll be all right, Mom." Then, changing the subject, "Say, do you have anything to drink?"

"I can make something."

"No, don't fuss, Mom. I'll get it."

My father went to greet his father. Mom and I chatted idly with my grandmother in the hallway as she took our coats.

"Well, come see the birthday boy," my grandmother said, and we all walked into the living room.

"Hi Gramps. Happy birthday," I said, without much conviction.

"Happy birthday, Dad," my mother said. "You look good."

My grandfather smiled and said, weakly, "Thank you."

My mother had lied. He looked terrible. He was sitting in a big easy chair, propped up by pillows. He was wearing a plaid bathrobe, and blue slippers, and he was pale, and thinner than I'd ever seen him. Except for his lower legs, that is. They were black and blue and swollen to twice their normal size. What a difference two months had made. It suddenly struck me that my grandfather really was dying.

"Chris, can you c'mere for a minute?" my father said from the kitchen. I was glad for the opportunity to leave the room. I didn't know what to say to my grandfather.

My father had made four gin and tonics. "Help me bring these in to everybody, okay? I made one for you, too. Give it a try. I think you'll like it."

I handed one of the drinks to my grandmother and sat down. My father handed one to my mother. "No thanks," she

said.

"Oh come on honey. I thought you liked gin and tonic."

"I said I didn't want it, Ed."

"Okay, all right. I'll just set it down here in case you change your mind. How's that?" He paused and sat down. "So, how you feeling, Dad?"

"I've been better, I s'pose," my grandfather said, managing a slight smile.

"Well, you're going to get better. I know you are."

"We've been having some radiation treatment done," my grandmother said, optimistically. "The doctors say there's a chance it will help him."

"See that, Dad? You'll be all right." He paused. "Well I bet you're anxious to open your present, huh? Let's not keep you waiting any longer." He got up and brought the gift over to his father, then sat down again.

"Gee, I wonder what that could be," my grandmother said, smiling.

Everyone was silent for what seemed like ten minutes, as my grandfather struggled to unwrap the present. I didn't even know what we had gotten him. I wondered how many times he'd given me a present and not known what it was. Probably never. When he finally got the wrapping paper off he seemed puzzled.

"That's a cordless phone, Dad," my father said. "This way you won't have to worry about getting to the phone when Mom's not around."

"Oh, so that's what it is," my grandfather said, smiling weakly. "Thank you." He sounded as if he meant it, but his voice was so feeble it was hard to tell.

"You know, he gets so upset when I'm not here and he can't get to the phone when it rings," my grandmother said. "We'll get a lot of use out of that."

I looked at my grandfather. I felt so bad for him. I couldn't help it. Clearly this was his last birthday. He had just opened his last birthday present. I wondered how it feels to know that. He didn't even save the wrapping paper this time. What would be the point?

"Let's try it out." My father took the telephone out of its box

and plugged it into the phone jack. He dialed a number, probably our house, and said, "Yup, it works all right. Say, you don't have touch-tone service, do you, Mom?"

"What's that?"

"If you have touch-tone you don't have to listen to all those 'clicks' after you press a button. It just goes 'beep,'"

"What's wrong with the way it is?"

"Well, nothing. It just makes it easier to dial."

"It is easier," my mother said, "but I'm not sure it's worth an extra eight dollars a month."

"It's not eight dollars a month, honey. It's only about two or three, that's all."

"I think you're wrong, Ed."

"You think I'm wrong? Who pays the bills, anyway? I oughta know."

"Whatever."

"No, not whatever. I'm sure of it. Seriously, though, you really ought to consider it, Mom."

My grandmother was crying now. "I don't see what's wrong with the way it is n-now. That's the way we've always had it. We don't need that, that touch-tone."

"I understand that, Mom," my father said. "Don't get upset. I'm just saying that for an extra two or three dollars a month – and it is only two or three dollars – things could be a lot easier for you. That's all I'm saying."

"You do what you want, Mom," my mother said. "But I think it's more than two dollars a month."

"Why do you keep saying that? I'm the one who pays the damn phone bill every month, don't you think I oughta know by now?"

Up until now I'd been silent, staring at my grandfather. He looked sad and confused. My parents, never at a loss for something to argue about, were ruining his last birthday party.

"SHUTUP!" I yelled, rising from my seat. "Can't you hear yourselves? Phone service! You're arguing over the fuckin' phone service! For Chrissakes, what the hell difference does it make!?"

There was stunned silence. I looked over at my grandfather. He, too, was starting to cry. I walked across the room and

hugged the old man. He didn't have the strength to hug me back, but it didn't matter. "Happy birthday" was all I could say. I just kept repeating it.

David Blaschke