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## Happy Birthday

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## Happy Birthday

Celeste T. Colmenares

There were nine individual candles on my birthday cake that year. I wanted one single solid candle, shaped as the number nine. My mom told me that the one candle would cost five dollars at Party City while the pack of 100 from the dollar store would last us a whole year's worth of birthday parties.

This was the case for every birthday. It had been reinforced, "You'll get something, and it doesn't have to be something that you want but you should be grateful anyways." So there was no need to be sour. There never was. Because acting sour was acting spoiled which we, for one, were not. I was haunted by this each time my family stole food from my daycare and went to the thrift store to shop instead of the mall. My parents made sure that my sisters and I knew we were not spoiled. But that night, I sure did feel like it.

On that Thursday night inside of Shakey's, I had made it to the big times, in terms of playground banter. I played in a game room crowded with sweaty gamblers that reeked of pubescent aggression that was soaked within their greasy hair. The flashing rainbow of illumination and blaring beeps, dings, and theme songs coming from the machines reminded me of similar machines that stood beyond the thick bold outlines in hotel lobbies. But instead of this room smelling like cigarettes and flabby skin, it smelled like a cafeteria on a rainy day when all the children are crammed in there and you can smell the person next to you, the person across the room, the breakfast they served earlier, what they

served the day before, and the bleach layed over the throw up residue in the restroom.

I played eight dollars worth of arcade games and when I went to ask my mom for another wrinkly bill to flatten into a coin exchange machine, she said, "Don't ask me for any more. That's enough. If you want more money, then open presents." That was always an uncomfortable move, opening presents just to immediately utilize the green paper hidden in between vibrant birthday cards.

So, I asked her for my dad. I wanted his money now. I thought I could get away with acting spoiled for a minute. When she said he still wasn't on his way I wondered why he had to work so late. But I thought I saw him at home. He was in the apartment complex parking lot. But maybe I didn't. My mom said I didn't. So maybe I didn't.

The rundown pizza parlor was so bright and loud that I kept forgetting to remember to ask for him. But I kept thinking about him. *Where was he? When was he going to show up? Maybe he was just buying me my present.* I wished my mom was as optimistic as I was.

"He's not coming. He's busy. He's doing 'his shit.'"

She said that a lot, but she never did say what "his shit" was. So, I grew up thinking maybe it was cigarettes that made someone neglectful. Maybe he was smoking again from the glass pipe I found in his car that one time and maybe it was that stuff that made him forgetful. Maybe it was that other stuff that would smell up the house. The stuff that he always needed capsules for, and papers, and cards, and spoons, and strings, and pipes, and lighters. Maybe it was that stuff that made him careless. I cancelled out drinking because his drinking didn't make a mess in the sink the way that other stuff did (the stuff that got my mom really mad). His excessive drinking was only a problem when we were in public, not in the privacy of our home where only our apartment neighbors could hear the shouting and slammed doors. Also, my mom never called Bud Light "his shit."

I was a child corrupted by fantasy. I was a fool who

searched for him amongst the crowd of his blood relatives singing happy birthday to me. *Where was his bald head? Where was his bigote? Where was his overworn Brady jersey that he wore on game days? Where were his tattoos?*

I did not turn around while my guests sang to me. I usually did, to keep an eye on my favorite man. This time I just focused forward. I looked at all the smiling faces that I saw every year. I saw the party decorations hanging from the ceiling fans (dog-themed because The Dollar Tree didn't have other unisex options), I saw a young female worker getting scolded by a man in a different color work shirt than her, I saw an overtly sexual Carl's Jr. commerical filling space between the 1st and 2nd down of the Patriots game, but I never looked back. I did not turn around. I never did, because he was always there. He usually was. He was supposed to be. Ready to shove my face in the cake as soon as I blew out my candles. He always did, on all my birthdays, to all my cousins, to all my sisters, to all my family, but he did not do it for me on that birthday when I had nine individual candles on my birthday cake.

My face did get shoved in the cake that year but that time I really did not want it to. But still, I forced a laugh so hard it made my shoulders move, though it might have just been dry heaving from the disappointment. The person who dumped my face in the cake has an identity that remains unknown, because it does not matter the way it never did.

I blindly walked to the bathroom with my arms out in front of me. I used my crashing to guide me. The walk felt like forever. Was nobody going to help the little girl with the new pair of Converse on? Where was that boss man that was yelling at his employee earlier? I could have used his help. But instead I persisted, with frosting swallowing my eyelids and clogging both of my nostrils. I struggled to breath and suffocated on the sweet fabricated neon paste on a pastry that signifies nothing more than a celebration of a year closer to becoming my parents.