

Happy Birthday, Benny

I remember the way my nine-year-old toes tiptoed across the green-carpeted floor of our hallway: quick and silent, like the movement of my breath. I was afraid of waking Mommy and Daddy—they never let me stay up that late, and I'd be in trouble if I were caught. But I had promised myself I would be the first one, so I kept going. A streetlamp through the window gave me light, and I wore my pink princess nightgown, the one I saved for special nights like Christmas and New Year's Eve. It fell just below my knees, small frills on the bottom and on the ends of the sleeves. Cinderella smiled from my chest.

My fingers grazed the wall of our house, and I counted the steps I took to my brother's room—one, two, three.... The house was silent. The streetlamp reflected in the mirror on the wall. The lamp was old-fashioned, like the ones that burned oil. My brother and I used to pretend we were in the days before electricity. He was my coach driver and pulled me in our red wagon. I would tell him where to go and what to do as he faked a British accent ("Aw'right, lit'le miss, where to?"). Sometimes, we would still play like that, but not so much anymore, and I was afraid that, maybe, we would stop playing altogether.

I heard a low humming outside of Benny's room, as if ghosts were whispering in secret. His door was cracked open a little, so I pushed it enough to fit my head through and look inside. He was asleep on his bed, like every other time I had tried to visit him that week, day or night. By the light of his TV, I could see his face. It didn't seem as pointy in his sleep. Books were scattered all over his floor, like he had started each of them in turn and thrown them to the side when he didn't find what he needed. His TV, though on, was muted so that quiet buzzing filled the room.

I ran to the bed and stood beside him. I whispered into his ear, "Happy Birthday, Benny! You're 18 today!" He awoke instantly, so calmly that I wondered if he had really been asleep, or maybe he pretended sleep just for me. He looked at me and smiled, and hugged me.

"Thanks, kiddo. I knew you'd remember."

"I was the first this year. I told you I'd be the first."

"That's right you were, and I never doubted you for a second."

I smiled at him, and I wished that all my time with him could be like that, with me making him happy. But then, I noticed that the skin under his eyes was dark. Maybe I should have let him sleep. Maybe he needed sleep more than he needed my Happy Birthday. I stared at

him, and he was quiet. His dark hair stuck up in all the wrong places, and I wondered when was the last time he brushed it. The skin on his face was greasy and dark in places, like he had gotten dirt on it and forgot to clean it. I knew Mommy and Daddy wouldn't like it. It looked like he hadn't showered in days.

His bed shook as he tapped his heel, and his brown eyes were fixed on the floor. That always meant he was thinking. I knew now that his mind was somewhere far and distant from me. And I wanted it back. I wanted it with me so we could celebrate his birthday together, and he could see that I wore my princess nightgown for the occasion.

"Mommy's afraid you'll sleep through your birthday," I said, trying to bring him back to me. He started, and looked at me as if he just realized I was there.

"Really? Why'd she say that?"

"Because you haven't left your room all week," I mumbled, hoping he didn't think I was blaming him.

He leaned towards me and looked me straight in the eyes and for a moment I was afraid he was angry, that maybe we weren't supposed to talk about him staying in his room, that maybe I broke a rule I didn't even know about. But then he smiled, and his eyes gleamed.

"Maybe I'll stay in here so long..." He leaned forward. "I'll become a bedbug...and get you!" He grabbed me by my sides and started tickling me.

I laughed as I fell back and yelled at him to stop and let me go. He paused, but still held me in place.

"Now, Miss Dora Filgry, is that any way to get me to stop? You have to butter me up! Make me *want* to set you free!" He started to tickle me again, and I laughed and laughed and laughed and begged him to stop some more.

"I said butter me up! Here, I'll help you out – who's the bestest bestest brother in the whole wide world?"

"You are!"

"And who is the funniest most smartest person you ever, ever met?"

"You are!" I gasped in between laughs. It was getting harder to breathe.

"And WHO! has the most powerful bed bug tickling super powers there are?"

"You do! You do!" I yelled. My stomach was getting sore.

“Well, Miss Dora Filgry, it seems you have made a compelling argument. You are free to go.”

I got up from the bed, giggling, and rubbed my sides as involuntary tears streamed down my face. He seemed paralyzed in that moment. His mouth hung open, and he stared at me. Then he jerked his head and grabbed my arm.

“Why are you crying? Why are you crying? Are you hurt? Did I hurt you? Oh my God, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’m so sorry, it was an accident, I would never—”

He looked so scared with his eyes wide and his eyebrows high that I couldn’t tell him that his tickling had hurt.

“It’s just because I was laughing so hard. You didn’t hurt me, look!”

I jumped up on his bed and stretched out my arms and legs so I looked like a starfish. I smiled at him with all my teeth (except for one of the front ones) and showed him that everything was still there. He hesitated before he hugged me tight. And I was relieved when his eyes went back to their normal size and his eyebrows came down from the middle of his forehead.

“I knew I couldn’t hurt you, I knew I couldn’t. You’re way too strong for that, I know you are. I’ve always known that about you, so strong, so tough, so—”

“Were you sad this time?”

His face seemed to darken when I asked, and his arms loosened their hold on me, until I worried he would let go altogether. What if asking made him sad? What if, now, he was going to stay in his room for another whole week and never speak to me again? What if he wished I had never tiptoed to wish him a Happy Birthday? What if he didn’t care that I’d worn princess nightgown? My face burned and I’m sure my heart was trying to win first place in a race—it beat so fast—but I didn’t say anything, afraid that I would say something wrong. Just when I was sure he was going to tell me to go back to my room, he rubbed his forehead and wiped the gloom away.

“I’m not sad anymore. No, I’m not sad, not at all. And you know what?” He looked at me and smiled. “I don’t think I’ll ever be sad again.” He got up and started pacing. “I’m 18 today. I’m free. I’m finally free. I can finally do whatever I want, so how can I be sad? Being sad is for people trapped, caged—with everyone to answer to and no one to care. I had a shackle on my leg, a shackle put on by age, my ‘inferior’, ‘immature’, slave-inducing age. As if age means anything, as if age meant I didn’t deserve rights or freedom or anything, as if age was a ticket to

freedom—well it is!—it’s my ticket to freedom and I’ll be damned if anyone tries to stop me. No one’s going to stop me, no one. I won’t be stopped. This is my ticket, my ticket out.”

I sat silent on the bed, and he paced the floor. His hands kept grabbing each other, like they couldn’t be calm unless they were holding onto something, and the only things they could hold onto were each other—his words came out faster and faster and he seemed to forget that he was talking to a nine-year-old or that I was even in the room—and his pacing got quicker—more fidgeting—and when he got like this Mommy would always call him restless or agitated. He scared me. I wished that his hands would stop and his head would stay still. I wished that he would become my brother again. But he kept talking about nobody stopping him anymore and he seemed to be getting further and further away from me, until finally I couldn’t take it anymore and I tried to bring him back.

“Benny,” I said slowly, “who’s stopping you?” I said it so quiet I was afraid (and almost wishing) that he wouldn’t hear me, but he stopped his pacing and turned toward me, his hands no longer grabbing each other. He looked me right in the eyes and I thought I saw a light—a fire—hiding behind the brown.

“Everyone.” He looked at me unblinkingly, his body still. “Everything.”

“...From what?” I asked, still slow and quiet, hoping that, with my question, I could keep him with me. But he stood silent and stared at me with his eyebrows crinkled, like he was confused that I would ask.

“From flying,” he said.

I waited for more of an answer, but none came. He was fixed in the spot as if he had been a statue, except I’ve never seen a statue stare like that. I looked away. More to stop his eyes from burning me than to really argue, I whispered, “But people can’t fly.”

“I know people can’t fly, what do you think I’m stupid?” His words made me jump. “And that’s exactly the kind of attitude that keeps us all from flying—from freedom—the pessimism, the doubt, the ‘I can’t this’ and ‘You can’t that.’ We don’t have faith anymore! No one has faith in anything and it’s people like you and people that think like you that keep us all down!”

I began to cry. How could I have let myself think that way? How I could have kept him down? It hurt me that I had hurt him. But he didn’t notice the tears on my cheeks or the way my long, brown hair fell towards the floor as I lowered my head. He went on. And the pacing and the fidgeting and the thoughts I couldn’t understand were all that mattered.

“Don’t you know? Don’t you know?” he asked, turning all his attention on me, and once again I felt his fire stare. “Don’t you know that you have to make your own wings, if you want fly?”

I closed my mouth tight and refused to speak. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe anything that would make him go back to normal, make him my older brother again. I didn’t like this brother. I wanted him to go away. I wanted to ask him where he was hiding my Benny, if he had burned him in the fire behind his eyes.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he said.

He took me by the hand and dragged me towards the door, my legs unable to keep up with his frantic stride. And before I could say anything, before I could ask him where we were going or why, we were in my father’s car, and the engine was on.

“Are you ready?”

I looked at him and I know my eyes were wide and my mouth trembled, but I just said, “Yeah, let’s go!” He peeled out of the driveway and my body melted into the seat. My town whipped past me in a blur, and each tree, each house, each stop sign we passed swirled into one. I wanted it to stop. I wanted to scream. I wanted to jump out of the car and roll away from him. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t move. I could do nothing but watch.

“Don’t you see, don’t you see? We’re free now. No rules, no restrictions, just us and we can go anywhere and we are going anywhere and no one can stop us. No one. Not our teachers, not our parents, not the law, not this stupid car, nothing. And if they try, you’ll see what happens. They can’t touch me. They won’t touch me, and I’ll make a fool of them for even trying! Me and you, we’re in this together, we’re in this together, and we’ll be free together and we’ll fly together, and we’ll fly because no one has us caged now!”

I watched open-mouthed as Daddy’s station wagon sped through the night, and I thanked God it was late and there were no other cars on the road but us—I didn’t trust Benny *not* to try and hit them. He sat forward in his seat, his body leaning over the steering wheel that he held in both hands. I begged him to stop, to please, *please*, slow down.

“Slow down? Slow down? How can I slow down? I’ll lose! Don’t you realize? It’s a game and I have to win. If I slow down, we’ll lose and it’ll be all your fault—I can’t slow down, we have to get a head start or they’ll catch us. Catch! Catch us! Don’t worry, it’s just a game and I know the rules and we’ll win—we *will* win!”

My heart pounded and my blood raced and his eyes darted back and forth along the road, his fingers tap, tap, tapping the steering wheel, and he bounced and he bounced and he bounced up and down in his seat, his leg twitching on the accelerator. It was the first time in my life I ever feared death.

“We have to win. We have to win. We have to win.”

“Please, stop.”

“We have to win. We have to win. We have to win.”

“Please, Benny, stop.”

“We have to win, we have to win, we have to win.”

“Benny! Please! You’re scaring me!”

“—we have to win we have to win we have to win—”

“Benny, STOP!”

He slammed the brakes so hard I dove forward in my seat, and the world swirled around in a black mess. All my blood and insides gathered in the front of my body and then bounced back. Everything was dizzy, but soon the dashboard became a dashboard again, and car turned back from blur to car. The driver’s door was open and Benny was gone. The key still dangled by the steering wheel and the engine still rumbled. But Benny was gone. I looked through the windows to try to find him, but all I saw was a wall of gray fog. I tried to calm myself, to understand what had happened. Both arms, both legs, hands, feet, fingers, toes—all were there. But around my knees, the frills of my princess nightgown—I was gripping them with my hands—were nearly torn off. My nightgown was ruined, and I let out a sob.

I needed to find Benny. He needed to take me home. I fumbled for the door handle and fell into the street, landing on my hands and knees. We were on a bridge, over the river that cut through our town. The street lamps and fog surrounded us and blocked out the summer’s nighttime sky, while the city lights sparkled like stars in the rippling water. Benny stood across from me, staring over the edge of the bridge. I ran to him, shreds of my princess nightgown floating in the still air. He looked at me. I saw the starry water in his eyes, and his lips were narrowed into nothing.

“I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you. I thought we were in this together, I thought we were gonna win. You were the only one I trusted, the only one who didn’t put me down, the only one with any faith. Now you’re telling me to stop? I have to be free. I will be free, and no one is

going to stop me, not them, not you, not anyone. I brought my own wings this time.” He stepped on top of the bridge’s ledge. “I told you, I made my wings. I’ll show you, and you’ll believe. They’ll all believe. I’m going to fly. I’m going to fly in *that* sky.” He pointed at the water. “There’s no cage on me, now. No cage. No cage at all. I’ve made my own wings, and I’m going to fly.”

I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to scream for help. I wanted to get up on the bridge with him. I wanted to grab his arm and pull him down. But I was afraid anything I did would push him over. All I could do was cry, and I did. And once the tears came out, the words did too.

“Benny! Benny! I’m sorry, please, please come down! I didn’t mean it! I didn’t mean it! We don’t have to stop! Please, let’s go back in the car. We can play the game, I want to play! Please, let’s keep playing! And you’ll see we’re in it together and we *will* win. Please, Benny, I love you. Please don’t leave me here!”

He stared at me. “Do you believe me?”

I lifted my head and met his eyes. The fire was still burning, but his body had stopped shaking and his fingers had stopped twitching and I wanted to believe him. I so wanted to believe him. But I knew that he was wrong. And I knew that, somehow, in between my tiptoed Happy Birthday and his frantic thoughts, I had lost my older brother. I had lost my Benny. And all I wanted to do was go home and take him with me to fix my princess nightgown. And there’d be no games, there’d be no bridges, there’d be no—

“Do you believe me?”

I stared into his eyes.

“Yes.”

I told him that I did.

Then he smiled at me, and all the heat was gone. The fire vanished, and I knew he’d come back.

But then he jumped.