

## Cake and Dirt

Everyone deserves a cake on their birthday, so I pick one up and put it in my trunk. I sneak 19 candles and a lighter into the pocket of my jacket. I drive to his house and ring the doorbell. His father answers and despite not knowing who I am, lets me in pretty willingly. He nods as if he does know who I am though, saying, “Evan’s upstairs.”

I climb the stairs hesitantly, not knowing what to expect or how Evan will react or what I, myself, should say. I knock once before I hear footsteps near the door. As the knob turns, I take a step back. I feel instantly at ease though once I see a look of surprise on his face— good surprise like an A on a test you thought you bombed. This reassurance sparks my spontaneity; he always brings that out in me. It’s like there’s this hidden burrow of energy saved aside just for him, like a groundhog waiting for its special day on February 2nd.

I smile and reach for his hand, saying, “Birthday’s shouldn’t be spent inside your room, nevertheless, alone. Let’s do something you’ve never done before.”

He doesn’t pull away, just turns around to grab a jacket that lay near the edge of his bed like it was waiting for this to happen. While he does this, I am able to catch a quick glimpse of his room, a place I’ve never been before. Some would call it messy, but I love it the way it is— used and lived in.

His lead down the stairs pulls my eyes away, and as we head outside towards the car, he calls shotgun (as if there is anybody else to take that place). Following along, I run ahead, calling, “Oh, no, you don’t!”

As I sprint past him, he calls out, “Not a chance!”

I beat him, however, climbing into the passenger side and locking the door while at it. To this, he gives me puppy dog eyes that I simply cannot resist, so I hand crank the window an ounce open, asking, “How may I help you, sir?”

To which he replies, “Well, you see, there’s this woman I really like.”

And I say, “Go on.”

“But she won’t let me in and I don’t know why. I’ve only ever been kind.” Here, he bats his long eyelashes.

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Well, it’d be nice to see your eyes as we speak, ma’am.”

And he gets me on the “ma’am.” So, I crank the window a little further, saying, “Continue.”

“Well, she’s absolutely the most...” but before he can finish his sentence, he’s reaching in and undoing the lock.

“GULLIBLE!” he screams, opening the door and tickling me out of the way.

Giving in, I slide over to the driver’s side and put the key in the ignition. With a simple flick of the wrist, the engine roars to life.

“Where are we going?”

“A good magician never reveals his secrets,” I chuckle in reply.

It’s a rule of ours that whoever’s driving gets to pick the music he or she wants, but since it’s his birthday, I give him free reign. Besides, what he doesn’t know is that I’ve come to love his music. I listen to it at home alone when I miss him most.

I am taking a different route than normal to get us to where we’re going. Otherwise, he’d know purely off of the familiarity of the route. I tell him to close his eyes, and then, I know he trusts me. If you’ve ever closed your eyes in someone’s car

before, when it's your mom or your father, you can rest your eyes with ease and let the methodical bumps of the road lull you to sleep. However, if it's your newly licensed brother or sister, your eyes open with every slight sway of the car or turn or noise or squeak or sometimes, for absolutely no reason at all.

When we arrive, I put the car in park and tell him not to peek. With hands over his eyes, I lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek whispering, "Open."

His black glasses go crooked on his face with his smile. Reaching over to the glove box, I pop the trunk and scramble outside.

"Come on, let's go!" I bubble, leaning down so that my face is within frame of the car door. And like that, we're outside.

I go around back and pull out the cake. When he sees it, he sighs, saying, "Millie, you know you didn't have to do that."

"Well, of course, I did. Everyone deserves a cake on their birthday, especially you," I assert, poking a finger into his chest. He captures the finger with his own and draws it near his lips, kissing the top knuckle. Despite what he has said, I can see appreciation deep in the creases that form around his eyes when he smiles.

We walk in the woods where we first hung out. It was late and December then. His heart was broken and my head a mess. Somehow, we were like two missing socks—pointless alone but just made sense together. We could go with others, I suppose, but that would be like using two different china sets for the same table.

We sit at the edge of the creek, where we first told our feelings for each other and talked about going swimming even though we had no swimsuits. That was April, but it is now May 29th. Reaching into my jacket pocket, I pull out the candles and push them gently into the soft batter of the cake. They remind me of books on a shelf, lined up neatly in rows— some sitting tall while others dip down. I flick the lighter and bring the flame under my chin.

"Tell me a ghost story, Evan," I utter in a trembling throaty voice.

"You're such a doofus!" he jokes, nudging my shoulder.

I move the flame to the wick of each candle, except for the ones Evan lights using an already burning candle. It leaves a trail of dribbled wax across the top of the cake, but he just proclaims how it adds more flavor.

We sit on the ground across from each other criss-cross applesauce style with the cake glowing in between us. I like the way the 19 flames illuminate his face— his stubbled chin, the mole that rests above the corner of his mouth, the dancing amber reflection off the lens of his glasses. His eyes meet my gaze, and his face contorts into a smile suppressing a giggle. Taking his hand, I begin, "Happy Birthday to you..."

He looks at me the whole time I sing.

"Now, make a wish," I insist with a wink.

And instead of the cliché *you're all I could ever wish for*, he simply closes his eyes and puffs out his cheeks and with one big swift billow blows all the candles out. As the smoke lifts around us, he says, "Shall we?"

"We shall," I reply with an imaginary cheers of imaginary glasses filled with imaginary wine.

"Where's our silverware, madam?"

"Oh, shoot."

It's the one thing I forgot.

His face turns to worry for a moment as he realizes this for himself, but as quickly

as it had soured, it sweetens into something even better than before.

“We shan’t need those civilian things anyway.”

I look up to see what he could possibly mean but am met with a fistful of frosting.

*He didn’t dare*, I think and plunge the rest of the cake into his face. I laugh at myself for doing such a thing and then, at him for looking so innocently betrayed with bits of cake hanging off his face.

I should’ve expected what was next.

Swiping those bits of cake off his face, he throws them at me, and we laugh at each other sitting on the ground covered in cake and dirt.

He takes my hands and thanks me.

“This means the world to me, Millie. It’s by far the best gift I’ve ever received.”

“My pleasure, but really, it’s nothing.”

“No, Millie— not the cake, not the candles. The memories. You.” He points at my chest. I reach up and grab his finger, kissing the top knuckle.

Finally, I ask, “What did you wish for, Evan?”

To which he replies with a smirk, “A good magician never reveals his secrets.”