

A Birthday Party

Patrick Bernard

One hundred candles. It did seem too many. And for such a small cake. One hundred close-rank candles at attention before the relatives who thought perhaps her respiratory system not quite up to the task of that formidable assembly. And she was happy to concede. 'Make a wish make a wish'. She was at least responsible for that particular reward of her considerable longevity. But what could she wish for? What could she possibly wish for? To wish would be to invest a seed in a barren soil. Surely. Life in its progressive application lay a number of spent birthday cakes behind her and now offered only the potential of a disagreeable correspondence with her own receding anatomy in the wings and the wards of her remaining years.

'I've made a wish'. She had the suspicion that it was beyond the faculties of the carrot cake. But she was an optimist. The children then gave their breath to the inevitable battle and extinguished her cake by the decade. One hundred little heads struck from their little shoulders in a delicate execution. A handful of survivors took further convincing. In the aftermath, the dismembered regiment were up gathered and put away in the presumption of her possible continuation. The subsequent retreat into the comfortable chairs to enjoy the spoils was performed with a glad ceremony.

The unassuming centenarian sat settled between cushions as she fit her own meagre slice into spoonfuls and mouthfuls. How was it possible that she could inhabit such a number? Schoolchildren might easily calculate and reduce one hundred into its separate digits. History might dismiss a century into its inclines and declines, into its politics and into its textbooks. But the measure of a human life in all its consequence and inconsequence is immeasurable. It could not be taken by the spoonful or squeezed into a page from which it would force and burst at the seams into each manifold, infinitesimal impression that is the sum of a life. Nevertheless the cake was highly regarded, and each participant took their own piece with due gratification, their own seams otherwise intact.

After the food and the day and the conversation had begun to subside each family withdrew to their own car and to their own home in the commotion of coats and keys. She was glad of the commotion. She would often wander into the town and she would watch the crowd as it would inhale exhale. Watch them as if from a hilltop upon which she now sat among the eternal audience; that quiet statistic that would look on as the world made a steady ascension from the stalls. And to the window of the front room she came, the silent vessel of a protracted life that shone irradiant from its interior, but that a gentle breath might easily extinguish. Did she look out of the window to the dispersion of her assembled relations? Perhaps something else.

In the front garden, the naked elm under which she had encountered and shed her youth spread its eager shadow long across the ground behind in its tremendous wake as the sun put its head to the incumbent ground. Like however many candles exhaling.

Inspiration

To become a centenarian is often to simply inhabit a number and become a statistic. Old age has always been a curiously dehumanising process. Beneath all of the years and wrinkles is still a fully formed life that cannot be defined by this particular milestone. Life is not defined by its milestones.