

### Birthday Party

Every click of the clock was a cruel reminder that I was in fact spending my 60th birthday in a New Jersey public school. Tick. Tock. 60 seconds in 1 minute. 60 minutes in 1 hour. 60 years in 1 never-ending disappointment. I wonder if it's possible to die of boredom? Would the mailman happen to toss the Saturday newspaper in such a way that it would open up as it hit my stoop step so my cat could crawl up and read: Obituaries—60 year old woman dies on her 60th birthday. Cause of death: So bored her eyes oozed out of her head in search of anything more interesting than 60 over-achieving, anxious, high schoolers scribbling away on scantrons. My eyes felt heavy as they inched out of their sockets, fed up that I had forced them to read the *Happiness is a Choice!* poster adorning the back of the room for the 60th time today.

“Excuse me ma’am, how much time’s left in this section?”

Unfortunately for them, my eyes wouldn't be able to make their grand escape. My lips opened wide in the shape of an O, waiting for my brain to catch up and give it direction. Thump. Thump. Thump. The girl glaring at me tapped her foot on the linoleum floor with vigor while awaiting my answer. Thump. Thump. Thump. As though taunting me, the foot seemingly matched up with the rhythm of the clock hand. I could imagine the title in the next day's paper: Doctors amazed— Girl's foot runs off in the middle of SAT! Takes shoe with it!

I looked back up at the girl's eyes, only able to hear the sound of the amalgamated shoe-clock orchestration reverberating in my head. “What did you ask?”

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“How much time do I have left?”

“We have 6 minutes left,” I said without glancing at the clock.

The girl's eyebrows shot up and she quickly scanned the room in terror, hoping to find reassurance in the communal sense of haste found in the grimaces of the kids around her. She tightened her grip on her own pencil and the sound of flipping paper filled the air; her eyes darted across the pages pleading for her to slow down.

I wish I had something to be in terror about. Instead all I could feel was a minor discomfort from the splinters sticking to the backs of my thighs. The fully filled flimsy cup of wretched watery coffee sat solitarily on the table in front of me. I wish I had taken a donut instead. But they told us to treat ourselves to one, and only one, breakfast item and the donuts seemed stale.

They had also given us rules—

Please write the time on the board. Read the instructions from the booklet, verbatim. Do not answer questions. Remain silent. Only read what is written, add nothing more. Retract into the background so you become a piece of furniture in an empty room. Be an accessory. Exchange your individuality for stale donuts and watery coffee. Thank you and enjoy!

I thought I was doing a good job. The clock ticked and the girl's foot thumped but my heart seemed to have forgotten its job. It was slowed and lazy and told me— if you don't do something other than sit here I will drop through your kidneys and through your hip and through

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your leg and finally, through the floor. There you won't ever find me again. I couldn't let that happen.

"It's my birthday," I blurted out. Or maybe I didn't since none of the 60 anxious kids looked up and the clock did not stop ticking and the girls foot did not stop thumping. I had plans to go by myself to see a Saturday matinee screening of an old Charlie Chaplin movie to celebrate. I had even picked a buttoned blue blouse to wear and decided that maybe I would even treat myself to a malted milkshake after. But when I went to buy a ticket the day before, the theater regretted informing me that not enough patrons attended so they were forced to cancel. Luckily, the school I worked at needed extra proctors for the SAT and I wouldn't have to sadly sit still at home, unnoticed, on my birthday. I liked working for the school. I was a library aide and I always loved when the harsh silence of studying students was broken when someone would ask me a question about the Dewey decimal system or request help with a printer. It was like my words were the only thing important enough to interrupt the stillness. I guess it wasn't that bad to spend my birthday here.

Beep. Beep. Beep. My watch went off to mark the end of the 6 minutes. All 120 eyes simultaneously flashed at me-- some with anxiety and others with relief. Beep. Beep. Beep. It was nice being in the company of people, rather than just my cat. The alarm kept ringing while I looked at each individual kid, smiling at them and telepathically trying to thank each one of them for coming to take the SAT on my birthday. When I got to the girl whose foot almost ran off, I reached to turn off my watch. "Pencils done everyone. Please listen to my instructions to make

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sure that your test can get properly scored.” Everything went silent and the kids shifted in their seats, eager to finally hear what I had to say.

“It’s my birthday,” I said. The students raised their eyebrows and looked around the room at each other. All of a sudden, I heard a chorus of kids proclaiming their adoration for me.

“Um... Happy Birthday, ma’am”

“Happy Birthday”

“Happy Birthday, miss!”

“Wow, happy birthday!”

Each of the 60 kids, who had all showed up to spend their Saturday with me, wished me a *happy birthday*, just like in the dream I had before my 59th birthday. Boom. Boom. Boom. My heart contracted, trying to squeeze onto this moment so I could never forget it.

They continued:

“Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday. Hope you enjoy it.”

“Happy birthday”

Suddenly the noise was too much. It sat on my chest and refused to move. And as the students continued to wish me a happy birthday, the noise elongated across my arms and to the very tips of my toes, and through to my stomach and up into my ears until I could no longer hear.

“Miss, are you OK?”

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I wanted to say something but my mouth stayed shut in rebellion, telling me-- This is what you wanted, isn't it?

I could only feel a crushing pressure as I slid out of my splintering chair onto the smooth linoleum floor. And on the ground, with my blue blouse dirtied, I wished for the ticking clock and scribbling pencils and thumping foot-- anything to get rid of my burning heart. It was my first birthday wish to ever come true. Soon, I saw a beautiful blitzing white light and felt myself get lifted from the frigid ground into the noiseless air.