

The Celebration · *June Brindel*

THE CHILD'S FACE looms over her bed. His voice is pitched at least three notes lower than usual. "I feel bigger, Granma."

"Happy Birthday," she says.

"I think I have a five in me." He points to somewhere inside. His eyes are serious. The pajama top has slipped sideways off one thin shoulder. His distended stomach protrudes above the bottoms.

She wriggles toward the wall and opens the quilt. "Climb in. It's cold."

"Have to piss," he says, disappearing.

"Don't forget the specimen." She keeps her voice low, remembering her tired son in the next room. She throws on her robe and runs after the child. He is trickling into the toilet. In one hand he holds a paper cup full of warm urine.

"Here." He hands it to her. "Tape's in the cupboard."

Her head is still dizzy with sleep. She fumbles in the dark, finally turns on the light. By then, he has flushed and washed. He finds the nitrozene paper before she does, tears off a piece and puts it in his mouth. "Stick some in the piss," he instructs her, and as she pauses, shows her how.

Both pieces of paper have changed hue. They measure them against the color wheel on the tape holder.

"Yellow on the piss," he says.

"5.8." She will try to remember the numbers while she searches for the chart.

"Spit one is blue," he says. "That's good! That's 7.5."

She is overwhelmed with the self-possession of this miniature man. I tower over him like a fuzzy-brained titan, she thinks. He brings her the chart and shows her where to write. His numbers are not yet reliably legible, but soon he will take care of this too, that is clear. A great deal has become clear in the last few days. She feels as if a powerful spotlight were shining directly on this house, this child. She is pressed against glass, witnessing a breathtaking operation. She is an outsider, a non-professional, lacking vocabulary and observational technique to fully comprehend. A dilettante, in fact, aged and superficial.

"Cartoons!" he shouts suddenly and runs to the T.V. His voice is up now to the normal pitch of a five-year-old. The usual pitch. Nothing is normal. But she breathes easier for a moment, seeing him aligned with a long procession of shouting children.

"Put your robe on, and slippers!" She turns up the thermostat. But he is lost in slapped pies and exploded rabbits. She puts his unconscious limbs into the warm clothing and turns down the volume. "Let's let Daddy sleep."

He nods. Turns it back up the moment she walks away. And though she has sworn herself that she will do this thing, take over so that her son can rest, she is almost glad of the booming sound. But she returns dutifully and turns down the volume again.

“Hey,” he says, turning it up.

Their eyes confront. She falls in love with the flash in his. They compromise. She compromises.

The water is heating for her coffee. Her head does not seem to clear. She splashes cold water against her eyelids. The chart seems impossibly complex. She brings him a glass of grapefruit juice, diluted with water, one part to three. He pushes it away.

“That’s not right,” he says, keeping his eyes steadily on Bugs Bunny.

Intimidated, she returns to the kitchen and studies the closely written instructions. He is right, of course. First come the calcium and yeast. Then, after a half hour . . . How on earth do they keep it all straight? Find energy to make all the special foods, record all the tests, remember the order and nature and amount of medication? She flounders through it. The boy takes time off from T.V. to help her. By the time she has reached the third level of breakfast instructions, her coffee is cold. She is drooping over it when the man fills the doorway. His face is a new one, with lines running down beside his mouth. His eyes are still exhausted, but he is smiling.

“My little mother,” he says, stroking strong fingers down her spine in the old way he has always seemed to know. “It’s nice having you here.”

She is ready to weep. “I think I’ve done everything wrong.”

“I doubt it.” And then in a brisk efficiency of question and movement he finishes all the chores and they sit suddenly smiling across a fragrance of bacon and waffles.

She is dismayed at her hunger. “I had thought I would eat only what he can eat,” she says.

“If you want to. But he knows other people have different diets.”

She has scarcely taken a bite when the small face is at her side. “Do you like it?” he says.

“I’m afraid I do,” she chokes.

“It’s good for you,” he says. “Not for me.”

Her son has snapped off the cartoons and brought the bowl of saltless, sugarless, milkless oatmeal to their table. “Let’s talk,” he says.

“I have a five in me, Dad.”

“That’s good.”

“She doesn’t know what comes first.” He is gulping the oatmeal in huge spoonfuls.

“We’ll have to help her learn.”

“Because she doesn’t know much.”

She is searching blindly for a Kleenex.

"Oh, she knows a lot. People know different things." The man is smiling at her as if she were the child.

"It's all right to cry," says the boy.

There is another flurry of cooking and blending before this remarkable father is ready to leave for work. "Think you can manage?" he asks. "Jean won't be back till four."

She is studying the chart. "You've written everything down?"

"He knows what has to be done. Or you can call me."

It is Sesame Street time now. The boy seems absorbed.

"For the party, we'll have only what he can eat," she whispers.

"Beautiful."

"I'll fix it." She hopes that by standing very erect she will return a solid feeling to her spine.

Her son kisses the tops of both their heads. "Remember, no T.V. after Sesame."

"Okay, Dad."

"Granma likes to read stories, you know."

They stand at the window and wave as the car moves away. She is glad for the Muppets. Nothing uncorrectable ever happens to them.

In the Russian Folk Tales, terrible things happen, but not to those who are beautiful and good. They lie together on the big bed as they read. ("Try not to say, 'Don't run,' but keep him quiet," were the doctor's orders.) And then suddenly without warning, he races to the bathroom and she cries, "Don't run!"

"I made it," he says.

She is left staring at the Czar's third son who has galloped twenty thousand versts and worn out seventeen horses and is now claiming his bride and his everlastingly happy life.

"Come check my shit!" he yells.

She is nervous about this. She cannot find the instructions on the chart. They have a disagreement about whether or not it is flaky, but they are both sure that yes, there are food particles.

"It's flaky shit," he says with great firmness.

"I call it B.M." she says.

"I call it shit," he says. "Write it down." Again he finds the place on the chart and reminds her that the time must be noted as well. Time is very important.

"Yes," she says. "Time."

Together they get through the layers of lunch and medication. Together

they mark the chart. While she is washing dishes, there is a loud thump from the living room. He is leaping from one chair to another. "Oh, no, don't" she cries. She is a failure. He will have an attack. It will be her fault.

"You don't want me to do anything," he says.

"I want you to do everything," she says, but it convinces neither of them. She remembers the quiet game she has brought. It is too early in the day for presents, but she reverses her opinion. Time, she thinks.

She brings out the game from her suitcase. He is mildly interested.

Before their nap she tells him about her own little boy and the funny things he did and said.

"Didn't he ever grow up?" says the child. He clearly does not believe that this boy has disappeared into the man who is his father.

They both sleep. She wakes after fifteen minutes in panic, but it is only the heavy breathing of the child that she has heard. It had stalked into her dream as a monstrous Siberian beast, tracking them steadily until they dropped from weariness, upon which it grabbed the boy and— She cannot shake off the dream.

Confront it, she vows, and settles down with the medical journals her son had hesitated over the night before. "You might not want to read these. They tell it like it is."

"That's what we have to know," she had flourished bravely.

She is engulfed instantly in a forest of terminology. Once in a while a phrase shines out like a signpost and then she is lost again. Some statistics spring like traps. Not named until the forties. *Average life expectancy then, two years!* She feels the metal clang of teeth. *Now raised to sixteen, though a few are living into adulthood.* She is dragging her chains across the barren steppes. After all, what is adulthood? Is she not herself still a child in many ways? Certainly her son at thirty-one is still a *young* adult. ("It would be nice if he made it to thirty-one," he had said the night before.) But there are no statistics on the treatment the boy is getting.

The research is enormous. Dauntless explorers hack away at stifling undergrowth, erect bridges over chasms, build glass-enclosed rooms, sealed from the tempest, brilliantly lit, filled with magic pellets, magic foods.

But nowhere does the cause of the illness come clear. Is it a virus? A genetic malfunction triggered by a virus? The phrases recur like the repeated words of a spell. But the beast remains in darkness. One can only hear its breath.

The boy is awake now, trying to lift the heavy ottoman as he has tried every day, but he cannot move it. "I must not be any bigger," he says as she enters.

Then there is the chart again, the observation of functions and recording of tests, the intricate cooking of foods, the issuance of provender according to a rigid schedule (as when crossing a wasteland with limited supplies), the

arranging of quiet without seeming to order it (a hoarding of strength for the final assault). The boy is a fine lieutenant (she is not sure who is in charge) and an excellent scout, with a far keener eye for suspicious movements in the shadows than she. But like all young princes he is given to impetuous lunges and feints with much show of bravado to intimidate the enemy. And no one is quite willing to discuss the scarcity of reserves.

By the time the parents come home, she is exhausted. First the mother, back from an extended trip. (How could she leave him for even an instant, the grandmother had thought eons ago when the journey had begun, before her own weariness had set in.) The young mother also wears a new face marked by more than travel, but there is a leap into triumph as the boy rushes into her arms and she whirls around the room holding him. The older woman can hardly lift her heavy feet from the ottoman.

"No, you rest!" cries the young woman. "We'll finish up, won't we?" And she whips off to the kitchen with the boy on her hip as if he were no weight at all.

The horses wear out, thinks the grandmother. And when her son comes in, he sees that and urges her to the quiet of the bedroom. "We're not really living together anymore," he had said of his wife. "We take turns being with him. We have to get away sometimes." But she can hear them working together in the kitchen at all the intricate tasks.

It is a muted party. A feast of bland foods, a celebration of quiet toys. Still, the boy is more excited than is good and they secretly withhold several presents for another less charged evening. He is joyful with both of his parents there, together. The grandmother watches from a distance, longing for a magic pellet which would coalesce this joy into an eternal moment. But it moves on. She marvels at how skillfully they handle the evening's expedition, reading and singing and bedding him down at last with love.

They will not let her help tidy up and she lies back in the chair storing up rest as eagerly as she can, because she will insist, she has decided that she will absolutely insist that they go out for an evening of entertainment to refresh them, for now that he is asleep, how difficult can it be? *Unless there is an attack.* They demur. She persists. She can see the drift of their thoughts to far places. Still, they say . . . "No," she says firmly, in command again of strategy. "This is what I want to do, what I'm here for."

They give her two telephone numbers and prepare to leave. She can tell that they will be going to separate adventures. The boy's bedroom has been quiet for some time. They peep in and throw kisses, but there is no sign from him. Yet as soon as the door has closed behind them, he calls to her.

"Could I have some juice?"

She has to turn on the kitchen light in order to be sure she is offering the correct mixture at an approved time.

“Leave it on,” he orders.

She is only too glad to push out the darkness.

“You’re tired, aren’t you?” No doubt in the half light, his eyes are better than hers. She sighs and sits on his bed.

“You can rest with me if you want to,” he says.

They lie there together, listening to the distant traffic of cars and jets, a busy creeping jungle, crisscrossed by many expeditions, many dangers. But we are safe here, she thinks.

“When I grow up I’m going to live in your town. Did you know that?”

“I’m glad,” she says. But a cold nodule forms somewhere in her chest. There is a galloping past of years. The cold expands. Somewhere in the frozen future will be a time when no matter how close they all stay, no matter how fast they answer the call— Then will come the breathing of the beast. The splintering of glass. She is glad she is lying with her face turned away from him. She thinks he may be asleep, but after a moment she feels his fingers on her lips.

“I don’t like birthdays either,” he says. “You get used to being four.”