

January 25, 2016

The Storm

I blow out my candles. I really didn't know what to wish for so I just wished for "happiness," whatever that may be. The smoke arose from the candles as my grandparents, parents, and boyfriend cheered as Malcolm and I hug each other, his birthday crown nearly falling off his head.

My mother picks up the cake and starts to cut it as my grandmother catches the pieces onto paper plates (Disney Princess for me and footballs for Malcolm). My grandfather rocks on his chair as he tries to get the frozen ice cream into his scooper with little luck and puts the scoop back into the cup of hot water that creates a swirling milky watercolor paint. I'm glad they're both chocolate.

I move back to my seat between Dad and Will, readjusting my birthday princess sash and Will pecking a kiss on the top of my head.

"Happy Birthday. You won't be getting your presents from me tonight. I figured that would be okay after getting mine for Christmas," he winks at me and places another kiss on my hairline. I smile back at him.

Once again, after a month and a half, Will and I are no longer the same age. And, once again, Malcolm and I are no longer our "proper age differentiation" of seven years and 363 days. Still the oldest of the three of us.

A light breeze blows through the screened-in porch. Even though it's January the breeze is warm and the night sky clear. Lights from the street shine tallow yellow onto the pavement. A golf cart chugs by, purring as it goes.

This is probably the first time in a long time that I remember being truly relaxed.

"So, Will, how do you like River Ranch?" my grandfather asks as he wrestles with another scoop of ice cream. It plops onto a plate.

"Well, considering I didn't really get a look around last time we were here, I'd say it's really nice." He stuffs a fork-full of cake into his mouth.

"We went over by the skeet shooting range and—" He starts.

"Will near had a heart attack when a little boy—" I start.

"Oh gosh, so this little boy shot his arrow over the hay bale and he decided to go get it when other kids were still shooting! I almost had to say something." He cups his face in his hands as if his nerves are racing back to him, reliving the experience. The Eagle Scout in him has alarms going off in his head.

He goes on to talk about how we saw the glamping tents and the little girl asked me how old I was turning (22). He talks about how we went over to the petting zoo and take a picture on the wedding carriage and then realize after that we weren't supposed to sit on it (oh well). He

mentions how I'm almost bit by a horse and about how smart the donkeys were for knowing when they were going to be fed and how the caretaker messed around with them, acting like he wasn't going to feed them, only to receive a choir of loud brays (poor things).

It's funny to hear him talk about River Ranch in such a new way. The old retirement community is somewhere I remember spending many a weekend growing up in either March or April when the winds were strong and I was able to fly a kite or warm enough to go swimming in the community pool. He almost sees it in the same way as the new tourists see it: after restoration and renovation with "primitive camping" (aka tents and RVs...as if RVs are primitive with their occasional smoker...Lord) AND fancy glamping. Now there is a saloon for the parents to drink away their worry as the kids fly down the zip line.

When I was growing up all I had were a few ponies to scratch behind the ear and a playground that eventually housed a nest-full of banana spiders (and that was the end of that).

"Here is your birthday present!" I awake from my thoughts as my mother places a large pink bag in front of me. She puts a sports-clad bag in front of Malcolm.

"Age before beauty." Malcolm presents his hand out in a bow-like gesture, grin on his face.

"Uh, huh. Thanks, Bud. Love you too." I smirk back to him.

I pull out the tissue and—

"Oh, Mama, you shouldn't have."

It's a Jack Rogers box. I bet I already know what color they are...yup, I was correct. I needed a new white pair.

"Uh, yeah you do! You've had those old grubby things for far too long!"

"Yeah, I know I do. Thank you! Love you." I go over and hug her and my father.

"Happy Birthday, you old fart." He says with a boyish gleam in his eye.

"Hey, takes one to know one." He chuckles and I grin.

Malcolm opens his. It's a new pair of football kicking cleats. He's been needing a new pair too.

"Are those Audi Zeroes?" Will chimes in and they get into talking about football cleats and what Malcolm will have to wear when he starts high school practice in a few short months.

Soon, I help my mother and grandmother with the dishes and the boys head out to the bonfire. It's gotten cooler and I have no real interest of being frozen on my birthday.

"You know, I think I might try to take my old white pair and paint them. Maybe try a Disney-inspired print or something." (Maybe red with white polka dots. I don't know.) I place the paper plates in the trash can. My grandmother washes at a fork.

"That would be cute," my mother says as she dries what's been clean with a towel.

My grandmother's kitchen smells like cedar and loves of wheat bread. We talk about this semester and applying for my second Disney College Program before the boys come in and it's time for bed. I never realize how exhausted I am until I lie down in the bed, my mother lays next to me. My brother and dad lay on the blow up mattress on the floor next to our pull-out couch.

"Mama?"

"Hmm?" Even though it's dark, I know her eyes are closed. I roll onto my side to look at her.

"I had a good birthday. Thank you. I love you," I hug her and she hugs me back.

"I'm glad. I love you too."

I roll back onto my back and soon enough fall asleep.

I wake up to the sound of fingers on a metal sheet. I fully wake up and realize how hard it's storming outside as sheets of rain hit the metal roof. The porch light must still be on because I can see the backward shadowed outline of "Happy Birthday" across the window swaying harshly with the wind. I get up and walk over to the window and peak between the blinds, trying to see how bad it is outside. No luck. My mother comes over and joins me. Still no luck.

I get up and open the accordion door and walk out to the small living room where Will sleeps soundly on the couch (Captain Oblivious). The pounding on the roof is less audible here. I peel back the curtain of the slide door and look outside: the rain is flying horizontal like sheets of steel slicing the air; the wind pulls and pushes at the palm trees like punching bags. I can imagine the creek behind their house having white caps and the little alligator trying to find shelter in this mess.

I walk back to bed. My mother is still up but Malcolm and my father are still asleep.

"It looks pretty bad," I say to her. "I wonder what's going to happen to the poor people in the tents." It comes out more like a statement than a question.

"Hopefully they'll find shelter in their cars."

I nod and lay back down. I think about all of the tents that were out front of the property. I think about the little girl who asked me how old I was turning. Is she okay?

I fall asleep to lower back cramps and thinking about the tornado scene in *The Help*.

A walk.

The rays of the sun touch my cheek. I close my eyes and breathe in the sharp smell of cut grass and the damp smell of hay. I open and see out an airport and a long stretch of paved road with more dirt visible over it than not. We walk, Will next to me on one side, my grandmother and mom on the other as if we decided to become a long plow, shoes digging into the dirt to create future burial grounds for seeds. RVs line on one side and the air strip lines the other. Smoke billows from a smoker smelling of charcoal and pork. Boys shoot a target with bows and arrows.

Soon.

I find myself looking at large white, stable tents with mosquito net-like screened-in patios and rocking chairs. They are locked up. I look down. A little girl not much older than six-years-old soon finds herself standing next to me.

“Is it your birthday?” She points to my pink sash Mama gave me earlier. “How old are you turning?”

Her golden hair halos her cherubic face, blue eyes piercing me with her question. Not much older than Mama’s students. Not much older than the little kids I met while working at Disney.

I try to answer her, but my mouth isn’t listening to me. I stare gaping at her, no sound coming out.

“How old?” How old? Old.

Cold.

“Two people died in the storm last night after two tornados were spot slightly north of Tampa...” someone says. A woman. An announcer on the TV.

My senses wake up first before the rest of me does. My eyes are still closed. I wonder if I can fall back asleep. I grab my blanket and pull it closer to me. Cold.

“Did you hear it? I heard it. Of course Russ didn’t hear it,” my grandmother gives a small almost disgusted chuckle.

“I did. Of course Malcolm and Ed were asleep. I know Lizzie came out to look and see how bad it was...”

“One lady was sleeping in her bed when her roof collapsed on top of her...”

“Did you wake up, Will?”

“No, I never did. Yet, again, Boy Scouts has kinda taught me how to sleep in bad weather conditions.”

“...Fortunately she was rescued by the local fire department...”

“Lizzie made a good point last night: what are all those people in the tents going to do?”

“...and they took her to the hospital. She is doing well under their care.”

I groan and get up, obviously not able to fall sleep again. I look at my phone: 8 a.m. Two hours later.

I walk outside through the door to the porch, avoiding their conversation. My grandfather sits in one of the chairs.

“I didn’t hear it,” he tells me. I look around. The breeze is light again and there are a lot of puddles in the grass that are blue as they reflect the sky. I touch my father’s shirt he put out here to get the smokiness out of it. It’s soaked.

“It’s amazing how it can come and go like that with little warning or afterthought,” I reply.

We leave not too long after and as we leave we notice the amount of tents and even RVs that have left. Only four tents (one of which looks collapsed) remain struggling to stand.

