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Cake, excerpts

by Kirsten Elmer

The long table was covered with a slippery tablecloth that had balloons printed all over it. A handful of parents towered over me as they passed out thick and sagging slices of cake, and the other four-year-olds pushed each other out of the way to get the piece with the chunkiest icing. They started grabbing plastic forks and stuffing their faces while I sat at the end of the table dragging my fingernail across one of the tablecloth balloons until it deflated and wrinkled. *No thank you, I can't have that*, I told one of the mothers as she tried to place a wilting paper plate with a heavy chunk of cake in front of me. She pulled her hand back and held the plate close to her body, almost like she was afraid of me. After looking down at the cake and back at me, she slowly and quietly asked me why. As I started explaining, a few more parents started ignoring the other kids with icing all over their faces and huddled around me. Just like always, here they were—my own audience.

At four, I couldn't really tell them what was wrong with me. At twenty, I can't either. I know there is a long, jargon-filled description of "my problem," but I've never felt I could do it justice. People always expect me to know the right words to make them understand what's happening inside of me, and I've never wanted to let them down. All I have bothered to know is that I can't have sugar, fructose, or corn syrup because my mother trained me to write it on every field trip form since elementary school. I know that if I do have it I become hypoglycemic, meaning my blood sugar drops too low, and I know what that feels like. In seconds I become too tired and too hot and if I don't sit down soon enough I'll start to see black and won't know where I am. I know this all happens because my liver is just kind of fucked up. But at four, I guess I wouldn't tell you that.

"I don't have the right Pacmen inside of me," I told those birthday party mothers. Some would laugh, some would continue staring, but they were all still waiting for me to tell them more.

As a child, my mother used to tell me that everyone had little Pacmen inside of them that digested food, but I was missing the ones that came for sugar. "They take too many naps," or "they are very lazy workers," she used to say—I'm sure she was trying to teach me some important life lessons here too, but I never really listened anyway. Sometimes it was fun to pretend that she was right—those birthday party moms always ate that story right up. Other times I'd get too angry and beg my mom to stop lying to me. But every time, I would wish for the day that I could actually believe her; to be able to see it all as a game. Instead I started looking for a reason behind every natural occurrence. I'd ask my mom why the sky was blue and why the seasons changed and she could answer all of these questions. *But Mom, why are my insides so messed up?* I used to make her cry.

But here, in front of my own audience at birthday parties or dinners at a friend's house, I could tell them this Pacmen story and the entire room would fall silent as everyone grabbed for my words and held them down in their minds. At four, at five, probably up until ten, I could tell that story and control the room. I'd be the main lunchtime gossip among my

elementary school teachers in their lounge or a mythical rumor running through the fifth grade. Out there I was a mysterious being like an undiscovered cave with gold lined walls. The world out there always wanted to know more even though I didn't. I could feel everything going wrong; I could feel that things were messed up inside. Words like "glucose levels" and "enzymes" weren't going to make me stop staying in bed all day because it felt like my organs were trying to turn themselves inside out. Those words wouldn't stop the questions. Everyone always wanted to know more than I could make them feel.

* * *

It was five a.m. on the morning of my fourth birthday, and I was sitting on the bathroom counter with my mother wiping my face with a warm washcloth. I remember how the bathroom lights hurt my eyes and how I kept looking out the window, seeing the dark sky still hanging over us. Every time my mom went to rinse off the washcloth, I'd turn around so I could see my face in the mirror. I was pale and my chubby cheeks hung low like it was too hard for my jaw to hold itself up. There was nothing in my eyes; I can't be sad or confused right now. I'm just tired.

Earlier that morning I had woken up so suddenly that it scared me. It wasn't for the birthday presents that I knew were waiting for me downstairs or for the balloons that I knew were tied around my chair at the kitchen table, but it was because I knew something was wrong. My hands pressed themselves against my mouth and squeezed my lips together, but I couldn't stop the vomit that spilled out and slid down my chin and onto my favorite pajamas, my Winnie the Pooh onesie. Instead of running to get my mom with tears rolling down my face, like I usually did, I ran into the bathroom and pulled out a new roll of toilet paper. I pulled strip after strip off the roll and pressed them down onto my bed and all over my onesie, trying to clean up. It was my birthday, and I didn't want to ruin it. I didn't want to wake my mom up and make her mad.

Eventually the ripping sound of the toilet paper being pulled from the roll woke my sister up, whom I shared a room with. She got up and turned all the lights on. I was caught. I started crying.

Two years earlier I was in a grocery store with my mom. She always tells me this story; how I cried and screamed when she placed me in the seat in the front of the cart and would pinch her hands until she would pick me up and hold me. How when I later vomited on her in that grocery store, and she rolled her eyes and thought not again. I was the third child, babies spit up sometimes, this is just what mothers deal with. Her story always changes here; sometimes she says she left right away when she realized I was sleeping and wouldn't wake up; sometimes she still goes through the check out line with me in her arms. She always says she had done this all before and she couldn't freak out over the little things anymore. She always says how she placed me in the tub once we were home and I still didn't wake up. Sometimes she says she drove to our pediatrician; sometimes she says she called 911.

My mom rarely talks about everything that followed this day. She usually tells me I was a “smart baby” and leaves it at that. I’d spit out food and cry and stick my fingers in my mouth and pull on my tongue. I’d even refuse baby formula. “Anything with a taste,” she used to tell me. Sometimes I could handle plain oatmeal, sometimes it’d come right back up. It wasn’t until I was fourteen that I learned that I spent nine days locked up in an ICU full of premature babies hooked up to respirators. My mother met a woman who had her baby five weeks early with underdeveloped lungs. I was born one week late, and on the outside I looked fine. But I still had to have a feeding tube stabbed into my stomach.

At two I was diagnosed with hereditary fructose intolerance, or as I joke now, my liver just isn’t chill with sugar. After hearing the hospital story, I’ve never really pressed my mom on what I ate as a toddler or how she learned to handle it as a mother. But when she and the rest of my family weren’t around, I’d use all these stories to get attention or to impress my friends. Somehow going through something so traumatic sounds cool when you have no memory of it. But there’s a reason my mom won’t talk about those nine days I spent in the hospital or why she told me there were Pacmen inside of me. But there was also a reason why I needed to use it all for attention. Everyone expected me to be sad about it. Whenever I had those late nights with those too bright bathroom lights piercing my eyes and getting vomit cleaned off my face in the bathroom, my mom would brush my hair behind my ear and tell me she was sorry all of this was happening to me. I had to prove them wrong.

At the end of freshman year, I found myself hanging out with this sophomore more and more. It started out as nothing serious to me, as I’m sure it always does. He was more of a novelty than someone I actually thought about committing myself to. He was more of someone I could pull out of my back pocket with a single text whenever I wanted to. I knew there would always be nights of falling asleep to *Courage the Cowardly Dog* on Netflix waiting for me on the other end. I knew that he was everything I should want someone to be, but I still couldn’t let myself think that he was everything I did want.

Before I left for the summer, he told me about how much he missed his family and how he couldn’t go home to see them because he lived far away and it was too expensive to fly. He told me about his father and how he resented him for leaving his mother when he was nine. He told me what felt like everything there was to know about him and he opened up and before I left that night he told me that he loved me.

But I never said it back. I said I needed time. When he asked me about my own family I told him my mother and I had problems when I was in high school, and when he asked me why I told him I’d tell him later. *Because I resented the way she could never feel what I felt but always pretended to.*

He used to tell me it was alright, I could take my time; he’d still be here next year. And I liked that, not because I actually thought I would eventually love him in time, but because I could get this attention from him and I didn’t even have to tell him. He didn’t

need me to tell him, at least not yet. Maybe one day I would have to, but maybe that day would come when I was different; when I could get the words out without them feeling too heavy in my mouth or without the callouses being ripped from my hands. Maybe things could change.

The next year, he always told me he would cook for me someday. We could spend the weekend at his brother's apartment with the big kitchen and the window by the four-person table that you could see all of Cincinnati from. He would tell me this at two a.m., at eight a.m., at twelve p.m., at six p.m. while I'm eating crackers for dinner and he's laughing at me and seeing so much more for us when I still can't.

I kept telling him no it's okay, no I don't need that, but really I meant I don't want it; I can't want it or else I'll start thinking about how unfair it is that I can't have it. Eventually he caught on and stopped offering. He stopped telling me about the weekends we could spend together, just the two of us. He stopped smiling at me from across the room or kissing me goodbye at all of our ends. Sometimes I'd feel my teeth clench and resist the urge to reach my hands out and pull him back. Sometimes I'd ask him why he didn't want to stay and he'd say he was tired of trying when I wasn't. I'd say no, that's not it, you don't understand, but I still couldn't cut myself open to show him why.

We stopped talking. Well, he stopped talking to me.

He brought me a cake for my twentieth birthday. It had been two months since I had heard him say my name or laugh at the way my pants were always too short for me. Two months of wishing for the chance to tell him why it went so wrong. Two months of thinking maybe I do love him and knowing how I could fix everything but never being able to.

This was the time where I was supposed to set the cake aside and say thank you; say thank you, but I need to tell you... And he would understand and appreciate how I finally opened up to him.

I stared at the small circular thing. The white frosting looked lumpy and the floor of my mouth ached with a dull pain as I imagined the too sweet, too sugary taste against my tongue. It read "Happy Birthday Kirsten" in a gel-like blue icing that reminded me of toothpaste.

"Happy birthday," he said. He was still standing outside my door, his hands holding it out to me. The smell of burnt popcorn was floating up the stairs and down my dorm room hallway. My eyes stung.

"Thanks." I took it from him and put it on my counter. I turned back around to him at the door, leaving it there so I could deal with it later.

"Don't you like it?" *Don't ask me that.* "I wasn't sure if you liked chocolate or vanilla more, so I just went with vanilla. But if you don't like it, I could pick up something else for you." *Please drop it.*

"No, I like it, it's fine. It's just that, well." Well what? There's Pacmen inside of me? I knew that there weren't. For the first time I wanted to tell him everything; I wanted him to know how I ruined my fourth birthday because I woke my mom up at five a.m., how Thanksgiving sent me into a numb yet familiar depression each year, how cake scared me because I knew I'd never get to celebrate living like everyone else did, how I wondered if I'd ever *want* to celebrate living like everyone else did. But it all still felt too heavy. It bolted itself down to the pit of my stomach, and no matter how much I wanted him to feel what I felt, I'd never be able to get it out.

"Well, I just don't really like cake that much. But thanks," I told him. I still left it sitting on the counter a few feet away from me.

"Oh," he said, "well we could go get dinner instead. Just to catch up."

"Actually, I'm just not that hungry right now." My fingernails pushed and wiggled into the palms of my hands and my toes curled and uncurled inside of my shoes. It didn't matter what I told him, if I could ever get the words out anyway; I still couldn't go out for dinner dates with him, I still couldn't have picnics in the park with him, I still couldn't let him or anyone for that matter shove wedding cake into my face or do any of those cliché things happy people always got to do. (Where even is the nearest park?)

"Maybe we could do something else later this week then," he said. He had been standing in my doorway this whole time, but now he started taking a step back and glancing down the hallway toward the stairs.

"Yeah, just text me sometime." He nodded at me and then said goodbye. No kiss. No hug. Just a nod and then he turned away.

And then he never texted me later. And I've still never cut myself open.