

Colleen's Birthday, by Bridget Canning

Annie rants and rolls. Her hand-eye coordination has always impressed me. Almost ten years of semi-regular pot smoking and it still takes all my silent concentration to roll a single, loosely uniform joint. But Annie does it with instinctual grace.

"The problem is, there are more women than men in this town. Even the sketchiest guy with homemade tattoos and saggy-ass jeans can get a nice girl – nice girls – cause there are so many of them. And do whatever he wants with them."

"Do you think Colleen will want to go out later?"

"Probably." Annie licks the sticky stripe and smooths the thin white line. "She'll want to dance. And that's another thing. Since when does not dancing prove your manhood? You go downtown and the women dance while the men stand around, holding up the walls. Like it's a spectator sport."

"Waiting for the ones they like to get drunk enough." I say.

"Waiting for us. They can do that here, they can do as little as possible."

"Who do you think will be at the party?"

"Definitely all her work friends. And Kelly and Ian. And her cousins, they always come to her birthday parties, Sean and Carl and the fat one."

I nod. Just hearing his name feels like one of those air dancers has taken up in my belly, those "fly guy" tubes with dangly arms used for advertising that stand up in the wind. The tiny one in my gut inflates and waves at me. Sean Sean Sean.

There is a cough and a shuffle in the kitchen. Annie's grandmother is up and moving around. "Nan. You want anything?" Annie places the CD with its pile of weed under the coffee table in one practiced movement.

"No, getting a cup of tea. Is that Robin with you?"

"Yes, it's me. Hi Lorraine." I get up to say hello. Lorraine sleeps most hours of the day and get up after dark to prowls around; she makes soup, she listens to late night CBC radio. She lives the life of a cat. She sits at the head of the wooden table in her long flesh-coloured housecoat. Annie calls it her peach sheath.

"Flick that over, would you?" Lorraine gestures to the can of Belvedere tobacco on the kitchen counter. I place it next to her and she opens her slider for rolling cigarettes. "Where are you two heading out to tonight?" She wedges small clumps of tobacco into the crevice.

"Colleen's birthday."

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"Ah, the fair Colleen." Lorraine grins. Her teeth are ridged with yellow. The peach sheath brings out all her shades of nicotine. The grey in her hair has an amber tint as well as her long fingers with their pointed red tips. Even the whites of her eyes aren't pure; their edges look jaundiced, matching the cracks in the kitchen walls. If you could get a block of cancer, like it was soapstone and carve a person out of it, that's what Lorraine looks like. Although, Lorraine is likely to be one of these people who lives off smokes and Cheez Whiz until they're 120 years old.

"We're going to head out now, Nan." Annie says. She waves a joint at me behind Lorraine's back.

"Take a few of these before you go." Lorraine presses the top of slider down and snaps it back and forth, like a credit card machine. She nods to the Tupperware container on the table full of rows of prepared cigarettes. I take two and thank her. Really, I only like a smoke when I'm drinking and even then, I like the light stuff. Lorraine's smokes tear my throat out.

Outside, the weather has gone from crisp to bitter. It will take about ten minutes to get to Colleen's with a stop for beer. Annie walks with little brisk steps like she's chugging on wheels. "Take Todd for example. Colleen thinks he's a catch. If we lived in a different city, there's no way that guy would be a catch. Ten years I've known him and he has the exact same haircut. Short on the sides, brushed back." Annie draws Todd's haircut in the air with two fingers, an invisible rectangle. She exhales hard and her breath clouds up in the cold air, erasing the idea of Todd's dumb haircut. She buries her nose into the top of her scarf. She's trying to grow out her bangs and they drape over her left eye, the right eye glares out. "Fuckin' freezing out."

I pull out the invitation when we're in the convenience store. Colleen likes to go all out with things; she went to the trouble to make paper invitations and lick a stamp for every guest. "What do you think 'Universal Holiday' Birthday party means?" I duck into the back fridge and hook my fingers into a box of beer.

"As long as I don't have to dress up to go to someone's house, I don't give a shit." Annie says. "Friggin' theme parties. Too many people's birthdays involve an shopping spree. I don't want to buy a new outfit for someone's birthday. This shit gets expensive."

We leave the store and trudge up Merrymeeting Road. I try to ignore the oscillating energy in my belly. Anticipa-Sean. I had bumped into him a few times over the past couple of months. The last time was two weeks ago at a party on Bonaventure Avenue. Everyone had congregated in the kitchen even though it was a big, sprawling house. More people kept showing up and it got louder and warmer. I ducked into the dining room to escape the din. Snacks were laid out on the dining room table, chips and a veggie tray. There was a lazy Susan in the middle of the table with bowls of candy. I wasn't really hungry, but I wanted an excuse to be by myself for a minute, so I was nibbling.

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Sean came in and grabbed some chips, started slowly turning the lazy Susan. "This could get dangerous. Spin it too fast, disaster. Skittles everywhere. "

"Waste the rainbow."

"Good one. " Sean gestured to the lazy Susan. "What are these things called, anyway?"

"It's a lazy Susan."

"Why is it called that? Do you know?"

"Probably named after someone named Susan."

"Huh. Maybe it was her job to pass stuff around the dinner table." Sean popped a Smartie in his mouth and crunched it. He looked at me with his head tilted. His eyes and hair are the same shade of earthy brown; it has a disorienting effect, like suddenly seeing the boat in one of those 3-D pictures.

"Yeah, and she invented this," I said. "She thought, wow, everyone's going to think I'm so creative. But, everyone was like, look what Susan made 'cause she couldn't be bothered to pass the plates around." It babbled out of me. I couldn't meet his eyes for more than a second at a time. I started pushing the disk around with one finger.

"Fuckin' lazy ol' Susan," Sean said. He grabbed a couple of Reese's Pieces as they glided by. "These are my favourite."

"These are mine," I said, plucking up a Smartie. The bowl sailed on towards him.

I said goodbye before I left and he left his hand on my arm in what I hope was a lingering way. I cursed myself the whole way home. Why didn't you ask for his number? Why didn't you suggest he call you? Why didn't you do something flirty and cute. Fuckin' stupid ol' Robin.

Since then, I've been seeing him everywhere. A stranger in front of me in line turns and for a second, he's Sean: the way he moves his head, the cascade of his cheekbone. The shape of Sean's shoulders appears in another person's jacket, shifting and shrugging as they pass me on the sidewalk. Each time, the realization that it's not him is a little falling, like the way Lorraine smokes her cigarettes; she lets the ashes build and never taps them until finally they flake off into a little grey pile. Oh. It's not him. And then Colleen's invitation in the mail with the time and the date and the building tingle of certainty.

As Annie and I approach Colleen's house, the party theme is made clear. There are Christmas lights in the window and a jack o'lantern on the porch step. I notice some jelly beans stashed on a corner shelf while I take off my boots. There's a chocolate bunny peering out of a closet door. Where did she get Easter shit in November? She must have stored it away.

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Colleen bounds out wearing a cone-shaped birthday hat and a Canadian flag wrapped around her like a toga, Christmas garland around her neck. "Come in, friends!" The living room is decorated with strings of hearts, shamrocks, red Chinese signs and a Christmas tree. It must have taken her hours. There is a menorah on the table next to her birthday cake. The cake is decorated with cinnamon hearts, mini-eggs, candy canes. There are maple leaf shaped shortbread cookies, bowls of Halloween candy – that would be on sale this time of year. Run DMC's Christmas in Hollis is playing. "It's too early for Christmas music," says Annie. "I can't deal." She picks up the beer and heads to the kitchen. I follow her.

Sean leans on the counter next to the sink, talking to Todd of The Bad Haircut. Annie opens the fridge and crouches down. The waistline of her jeans stretches and her shirt rides up, exposing a wide sheath of flesh to the top of her bum. She doesn't seem to notice. She shoves jars and condiments out of the way and starts piling our beer in. I take one and twist it open. The beer foams up and over the top. I clamp my mouth over it and lunge over to the sink. Beer drips down the bottle and over my chin. Sean looks around and hands me a dish towel. "Don't you hate it when that happens?" I flush. He continues talking to Todd. I wipe off my hands, then the drips on the floor. The original plan was to just walk up and say hi. Present myself, basically. Now it feels like an interruption. The air dancer deflates and bends in half.

"Christ, q-tip head is already here." Annie rolls her eyes towards Todd. She opens her beer. No foam. She walks out of the kitchen. I follow. I take big sips from my beer. The quicker the bottle is empty, the sooner I'll have an excuse to go back to the kitchen.

In the living room, Michael Jackson's Thriller is playing. Colleen and Kelly are doing the zombie dance moves. I force a smile. Must look like I'm having fun. I wonder if he's seeing anyone. I wish I could relax. The screen door whines, there's a clatter in the porch. Three girls in tall boots with long, straightened hair. I've never seen any of them before. I wonder if Sean knows them.

Annie is talking to Brett and they want to go out for a smoke. They get their things together. "I wish there was just one bar where you could smoke. I agree with the non-smoking rules, but they could leave one place. One bar where you could smoke, a little sanctuary," Brett says.

"You should start it."

"We should open it together. Brett and Anne's Cigarette Plan."

"You should open a bar and call it 'Secret Fags.' Everyone would think it was a gay bar, but it would actually be for illegal smoking. Fags like cigarette fags, get it." Annie jostles Brett with her elbow. He purses his lips at her in fake offense. "Coming?" Annie looks at me. I glance back towards the kitchen. One of the straightened-hair girls hugs Sean in greeting. "Sure," I say and grab my coat.

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"You can smoke in the basement," Colleen says. "We're going down for a draw now the once." She twirls so that the flag flaps out around her.

"Even better," says Brett.

In the basement, Annie sparks up a joint and Todd, Sean, Kelly and the straightened-hair-hugger come down. "Oh, great minds," says Todd and pulls out a joint of his own.

Colleen takes one from her cigarette pack as well. "My friend Joy gave me this yesterday." Todd lights his and the nine of us stand in a circle passing his and Annie's around.

Sean stands next to me and when he passes me the joint, our eyes meet and the dimple in his right cheek twitches. He has amazing dimples. The smile hasn't even happened yet and there are dimples. They are as part of his face as his nose and eyebrows. Everyone laughs and talks, a magic circle.

Upstairs, Jesus Christ Superstar is playing. Sean frowns. "Oh, for Easter."

"I can't think of any non-religious Easter songs," I say. "Except 'Here comes Peter Cottontail.'"

"I don't think I know that one."

"Sure you do."

"I don't think so. Sing a bit for me."

"You know that song."

"I'm sure if you just sing a few bars of it, it will spark my memory."

"Yeah, I think you can remember without my musical help." I laugh. My face heats up.

"No, it would really assist me. How does it start?" Sean's eyes are all twinkly. Another joint comes by. I take a puff and get a flake of weed in my mouth. I turn away from him to remove it and compose myself.

"Is there tobacco in this?" Colleen waves Annie's joint at her.

"Yep, that's how I roll."

"I'm off the smokes. I'll spark this one up." Colleen lights her own joint and takes a puff. She passes it to Todd.

The reaction starts with Colleen. There is a look of horror, then realization. But it doesn't come fast enough. Colleen lunges for Todd, who is exhaling and handing the joint to Annie. "Stop, stop!" Colleen says.

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Todd has the same reaction. Exhaling as Annie inhales. "Laced!" Todd says. "Don't do it!" Annie lets out a stream of smoke from her lips. "Fuck!" The air is tinged with the scent of something harsh, like burning plastic.

"Oh shit, I think there's coke in that." Colleen takes the joint from Annie and puts it out.

"Where did you get it?"

"Joy gave it to me. She said it was special. I just figured it was hydro." Colleen sways back and forth. "Whoo. Special. Oh, fuck you Joy." Kelly crosses the circle and stands next to her.

"Oh, it's definitely coke or something." Todd runs his hand through the top of his hair, warping the smooth helmet. He exhales slowly. "Okay. This is my night now."

"Just try to enjoy it, man." say Sean. "Nothing you can do about it now."

Annie clasps the back of her neck and stares at the basement floor. "Robin. Could you come here please?" I go to her side. She doesn't look at me, continues staring at the floor. "I need. To get the fuck. Out of here." She leans towards me as she says this, but uses her regular voice. "I. Am. Way too high." Annie pushes her hands into her hair.

"Oh Christ," Todd says. "Don't have a panic attack. If you have a panic attack, it might have some kind of trickle-down effect. I do not want to have a fucking panic attack."

"Do you want me to take you home?" I say to Annie. "Come on, let's sit down." I take her over to a couch by the wall. She sits and leans forward hugging herself.

"No. No way. Can't go home. Can't be around the old woman right now." Annie passes her hands over her face, the back of her neck. "I don't mean here. I mean this place. This country. This weak-ass life I have."

"Do it then. Leave if you want. No one is stopping you." Todd rocks back and forth on his heels. Sean stands next to him, all casual but alert.

"You know fuck-all." She glares at him. He rolls his eyes and jerks his head away.

She turns to me, ducking her head down. Her brown eyes have dulled like they've been smudged with misuse and neglect. "Who will look after my Nan if I'm gone? I can't do anything as long as she's alive." Her voice is low and creaking. "And when she's gone, I'll have nothing." Annie says. She covers her face. "When she's gone, what will I have?"

I say nothing. What to say. I like Lorraine, but our affection is a cup of tea, an idle chat. The woman is work, the kind of work that gets into your joints, your nooks and crannies. She's an ancient factory of bad habits and worse advice. Annie's eyes are trained on the floor, trance-like.

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I wonder what she needs. Water? A cigarette? The straightened-hair girl stands next to Sean, looking concerned. They talk to each other with their heads close.

"I wonder if this is how it feels when you go crazy. Can people actually sense it when they lose their minds?" Annie starts to sway in little jumps. I don't know what to do. I rub her back. I produce a cigarette. I light it for her, she puffs.

"Last week, I thought Nan had died. I hadn't heard her stir all day. I looked in on her. She looked dead. She was just lying there in her peach sheath. I thought, she can't be buried in that. What outfit should I pick out for her? She hasn't bought any new clothes in years. I don't know what fits her. And then she moved." She inhales and lets out a long stream of smoke. "I was disappointed. Like I was only one number away from the Bingo jackpot. Fucking horrible."

"It's natural to feel like that sometimes."

"To want her to die?" Annie voice goes up. "Only an asshole would say that. Are you trying to say you're an asshole, Robin?" Her eyes bore into me, her hair sticks out where she's mauled it.

"No, that's not what I mean," I say. "I love Lorraine. But it's just been you and her for a long time. It's hard." Sean and straightened-haired girl stare at me from across the room. Todd talks away to them without noticing us.

"Why don't we get some fresh air?" I say. "It's super stuffy in here."

Colleen hears this and gives a little hop. "Yes! I want to go on the swings," she says. "The swings! I have swings in my backyard." She moves toward the back door of the basement. "Someone get my coat? Get our coats!"

Annie's lips quiver slightly. "Will you push me on the swing? Will you give me a push, Robin?"

"Of course I will."

"Not too much. I don't want to go too high."

We bundle up. Kelly pushes Colleen and I push Annie. They babble on and on. Once in a while, I look up and see the glowing light of the basement window. I can see the tops of their heads, Todd, straightened-hair girl and Sean, still talking together. It is like looking at coins at the bottom of a well. Wishes once made. I tuck my hands into the sleeves of my coat to warm them and push Annie's back.

When the taxis show up, I help Annie get in. She wants to go to my place. She has stopped talking about her Nan, she has stopped talking. Colleen hugs me. "You're awesome," she says. Her eyes shine in the cold night air. I hug her back. The house behind her is dark inside, but the Christmas lights are still on. Someone has kicked in the face of the jack o' lantern.

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Another cab pulls up. Todd and straightened-hair girl are waiting for it. Sean comes out carrying their coats. A candy cane dangles from his mouth. He helps her into her coat. The air dancer lies flat, can't even sigh. He takes the candy cane out of his mouth and looks over at me. He waves a Trick-or-Treat sized box of Smarties. "Here, it's the last one." Sean says. He passes it to me. "Be careful opening it, you never know what people put in these things" I say thank you and get into the cab. I don't look at them as we pull out.

In the cab, Annie leans on me. "I love you. You're a good friend." I squeeze her hand. "Don't fall asleep," I say. My back feels stiff from pushing the swing.

I take the tiny box of Smarties from my pocket. It's already been opened. Inside, there is a slip of paper with the candy.

555-7296. Don't be a lazy Susan. Call me.