

Everybody Wants Some Company

By: Emmy Rubin

“Happy Birthday Riley!”

For a moment the flash of a camera turned everything white, distorting my vision so that all I could see was swirls of red and purple before the smiles and crinkled eyes came back into focus.

The grin on my face was getting heavy after it was done posing for the snapshot of a memory someone would later print out and paste to sit for years in a paper graveyard of dead moments. The string from the party hat was digging into the underside of my chin, and was just another reminder of how I was getting too old for birthday parties.

My parents were flitting around the room, exchanging pleasantries with guests and getting extra forks for cake. They looked so pleased with themselves at that moment, absorbing themselves in the world of cake, presents and parenting. It didn't matter if I felt juvenile or outgrown because there were only so many more years that they could pretend I wasn't.

I was seventeen years old last tuesday, and now it's thursday, but we decided it'd be better to celebrate it today because it was Halloween. My family believes that every party becomes a thousand times better when you could add red food coloring to everything and pronounce it blood flavoured. Plus the decorations are super cheap.

“I think,” mom announced, “that it's time to open up some presents.”

I was excited for this part because if there's one thing that doesn't change no matter how old you are, it's the anticipation of getting free gifts.

My dad lumbered over to the orange armchair I was currently occupying with his arms laden with as many presents as he could carry. He looked like he was more wrapping paper than person. My mom trailed behind him with a single box.

They set all the presents in front of me on the floor, and everybody else turned their attention over to me while they were sipping their vampire blood punch and eating baby fingers or Snow Yeti ice cream cake.

“Open the green one!” my cousin Lou hollered from the back, balancing a baby on one arm, and a slice of cake on the other.

“Alright,” I said softly, already reaching for the green rectangle box.

Ripping the paper off, I saw that it was a copy of Bram Stoker's Dracula. Of course it was Halloween themed. Hopefully the rest of my presents wouldn't be monster or horror related.

“It's Dracula, get it?” Lou asked through a mouthful of cake, “because it's Halloween and you like reading.”

“Yeah, I get it, thanks,” I answered with fake enthusiasm. My mom always told me to always be grateful for everything you got, even if it was something you weren’t excited about, or didn’t like.

I put the wrapping paper aside to save for later and retrieved a promising looking bag with glitter balloons on it. After taking out the bag fillers, I pulled out a stuffed Count. By Count, I mean the Count from Sesame street, as in the purple vampire that wears a monocle and counts things by saying, “Three guinea pigs, ha ha ha.” I guess I was going to have to fake a lot of enthusiasm today.

“Oh Marlene, that’s just *darling*,” mom cooed, picking up the doll from the place where I sat him down next to me on the armchair. Marlene smiled and batted her hand as if to say, “It was nothing.”

The rest of the present opening went a lot like the first two; me hopefully unwrapping presents, only to be disappointed time after time by Halloween themed gifts that everybody thought were so cute and thoughtful. I think I should give myself some credit because all in all, I don’t think I pouted once.

Finally, I was at the last present, a blue cube covered in blue striped paper. Around me was a hoard of monster notebooks, graphic horror t-shirts, witch themed baking sets, and the like.

“Okay,” mom started, “this one’s from Auntie Gladys.”

Auntie Gladys was actually *great* Auntie Gladys, but I wasn’t allowed to call her that because according to Uncle Howie, she was insecure about her age. She didn’t seem like the type of person to be insecure about anything, to me. She always had a face that dared anybody to say anything bad about her. She was the kind of relative who you never thought about, but was always somehow at every family event hiding around the corner, popping up when you least expected it.

Until now I hadn’t even realized she was here, but I should’ve known better because she’s always here. Right now she was sitting on a chair in the back of the room next to cousin Lou, nursing a glass of vampire blood punch that, knowing her, made the punch live up to its name.

Returning my gaze to the blue striped box, I tore open the paper wearily, knowing that there would probably be yet another cliché gift.

The unwrapping revealed I wasn’t exactly wrong in my assumption, but I was nonetheless surprised. It was a jack in the box.

I turned questioningly to my Auntie Gladys. She raised her punch and said with her ever present scowl, “Happy birthday Riley.”

“Okay everyone, that was the last of it, and it’s getting pretty late,” my mother stated in her hostess voice, “does anybody want any coffee before they head home? Jerry, tea?”

As mom went to the kitchen to prepare tea and coffee, and the rest of the guests threw out their plates and waved goodbye to each other, I looked down at the box in my hands.

It was cold. It was made out of metal, probably tin, the type of toy that babies with bowl haircuts played with before the age of soft child-friendly materials. It had a bent handle on the side that was topped off with a red knob. One of the faces of the box was painted with the classic image of a smiling clown dressed in a jester’s costume, and on the opposite side was the same picture, except it was frowning. It was definitely creepy, but for some reason I couldn’t stop staring at it. After a while of studying the frowning clown’s white face, I turned the box around to look at the smiling one. Even though they were just pictures on the side of a tin box, I didn’t know if I trusted it. Maybe it was that I felt the frowning clown was going to move if I looked at it for too long, or that I didn’t completely believe the unbothered merriness of the smiling jester, but all I wanted to do was put the box away somewhere where I wouldn’t have to think about it for a long time.

I gathered up the discarded wrapping paper, intending to throw it in the recycling, and turned towards the kitchen.

“Do you like your present?”

I dropped all of the wrinkled paper on the floor.

“Auntie Gladys,” I breathed, trying to act like she didn’t just jump-scare me, “I didn’t see you there.”

“Sorry.” she didn’t seem sorry. “Do you like your present?”

“My present, yes, I love my present, thank you so much. I really appreciate it, and thank you for coming to my birthday,” I answered politely.

“It’s not your birthday. It was your birthday two days ago, I had it marked in my calendar. But I’m happy you threw a party because I got to socialize and eat cake. I love any opportunity where I can socialize with the beloved members of my family.” she said the statement so monotonously that it didn’t sound like she was enthusiastic about socializing. I think this was her being sarcastic.

“Great,” I replied slowly, simultaneously walking towards the kitchen, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“Oh, by the way, make sure that Jack has some company. He hates it when he has no one to talk to,” Auntie Gladys drawled before she turned away and got her coat. She promptly opened the door and disappeared into the evening.

Her words swam around in my head. Who was Jack? We didn't have anyone in the family named Jack since great uncle Jack died. The only logical answer was that she was talking about the jack in the box, but why would it need company if it was an inanimate object, granted, a creepy inanimate object?

Later that night after everyone had left and I was putting away all of my gifts before bed, my attention was caught by the metal box with the bent handle I had put on my shelf. After what Auntie Gladys had said, I felt a wave of unease towards the toy. But she was old. It was probably a bad joke.

I got into bed and turned off the lamp on my nightstand. Shaking the thoughts from my head I rolled over into sleep.

Some time later, I woke up to the sound of slow tinny carnival music coming from my shelf. I thought that I must have still been dreaming, because it was the middle of the night, and no one was awake to make any noise. It was just chilling enough to be the classic component of a nightmare.

After a few moments, I heard the pop of a box opening and a high-pitched voice asking, "Are you asleep?"