

Happy Birthday

When Finneas MacDougall woke up that Tuesday morning, nothing seemed at all out of the ordinary. His alarm sounded at precisely 6:56 AM with a perturbing buzz that startled him in spite of the fact that he had heard that same perturbing buzz at precisely 6:56 for most of his adult life.

Finneas was a stout man, forty-seven years of age, with a dapper grey goatee and wisps of grey hair at his temples. He lived alone at number 155 Grenadine Street, Greensville, Ohio. He had never married, and hadn't had a date in quite some time, despite his brobdingnagian crush on the plump redhead who worked at the stand where he bought his cigarettes every morning.

That morning, Finneas removed himself from the comfortable embrace of his bedclothes and stepped into the shower, where he washed, shaved, brushed his teeth and attempted to awaken. He drank his solitary cup of coffee and fed his dog, Mortimer. It was then, during the feeding of Mortimer, that Finneas realized that he was late for work. He dressed hurriedly, in the process managing to put his socks on inside out (which, as one who often puts his socks on inside out knows, is quite perturbing) and his tie on askew. Despite his deranged appearance and strange gait (this was due to the socks) he was by no means an unattractive man. There had been many a woman over the years who would have gladly been Mrs. Finneas MacDougall, but he had always been too concerned with his stocks and bonds to give any of them the time of day.

Finneas had never been late for work before in his life. He loathed lateness; it was the mark of a disorganized man, which Finneas most certainly was not. Finneas was as clean and orderly as a bleached-white straightjacket. As straight-laced as penny loafers.

He had lived in Greenville since he was seventeen years old. That made three decades in that town and still no one really knew him.

As Finneas rushed his way down Grenadine Street on his bicycle (for hardly anyone in Greenville drove a car), he decided he would have to wait and pick up his cigarettes and morning paper later, perhaps during his lunch break. He could do without his daily dose of nicotine and world events until then.

He arrived at work at precisely 8:37, seven minutes tardy. In his small, windowless corner office with those bizarre padded walls designed for pinning political cartoons or family pictures (of which Finneas possessed neither), he discovered a memo stating that there would be a meeting at 8:40 sharp. He hurried to the boardroom in a distracted flurry.

As he entered the boardroom, he was confronted, not by his boss' austere visage, nor the smug regard of his coworkers who were half as old and half as educated but were paid twice as much. Instead, he was greeted with balloons and "Happy birthday, Finneas!" spelt across the back wall.

He had never told them when his birthday was.

They never should've known.

All Finneas' only desire that day was to come to work, do his job and blithely ignore the fact that it was forty-seven years ago that day that Finneas Brokenshire MacDougall had entered the world. It was his sole and treasured wish, and for the first time in nearly three decades it had been denied. Though he was one used to

disappointment, Finneas was not used to being disappointed in this specific consideration and it brought out something in him he detested. His breathing became heavier; his fists clenched; His entire body began to shake. He pronounced with fury that had not been heard from that particular pair of lips for three decades, “WHY...CAN’T...YOU...JUST...LEAVE....IT....ALONE?!?!?!?!?” And with that turned rapidly on his heel and quit the boardroom with ferocity.

His didn’t stop with leaving the boardroom. He stormed out of the ten-story building like a man on a rampage. In three decades of working at Pomme and Asperge Brokerage Offices he’d never been late nor missed a day of work and for the first time in his life, he was truant. He felt like thirty years’ worth of pent up frustration had exploded in an atomic bomb inside his chest. It was HIS birthday, and therefore HIS choice to ignore it if he so wished. He neither comprehended nor cared why this was seemingly unfathomable to his colleagues. Of course, they neither comprehended nor cared why he reacted so to their feeble attempts to bring joy into the life of a very sedate man. Perhaps this is what frustrated him; that they thought a few balloons and stale cake would erase thirty years of numbness and solitude.

But this was not the least of the reasons Finneas MacDougall was so frustrated on this Tuesday. It was no only the anniversary of his birth, but the anniversary of his parents’ marriage, divorce, remarriage and his emancipation from them. The day he got his job as a junior clerk at Pomme and Asperge, he had found himself an apartment (the same one he presently occupied) and had not spoken to either of the beings responsible for his genetic material since. Every year on this day at precisely seven o’clock in the morning, his mother called and left a message on his answering machine (“You’ve

reached Finneas MacDougall. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message.”) begging for some kind of contact, but every year for thirty years he had ignored it.

There had been no call this year.

Finneas knew why.

His mother was dead.

It had never been his mother he hated. She was a small, lovely woman, though his brute of a father had suppressed her into silence. That was one reason why Finneas hated him; but there were a thousand others. That was why he chose to remain distant, silent, and blissfully ignorant of the goings-on of their lives, the two people to whom he was connected by genes and, in his opinion, nothing more. His feelings for them were no longer ones of hate, but of distaste, like the feeling left in one's mouth after one had taken a rather substantial gulp of sour milk. It was on this day, the day it all culminated, that this sour-milk feeling was strongest, and Finneas chose not to acknowledge it and thus douse it with a healthy portion of gin.

However, the absence of the phone call had made his sour-milk feeling indelible.

Finneas decided this was too much to take in without shaving five minutes off his life, so he made haste to the cigarette stand for a pack of his carcinogen of choice. The redhaired girl was there, as usual, smiling in all her pretty plumpness. She looked him in the eye for what felt like the first time when he asked her for his brand, and she said, “You know, I see you every day and you've never looked this messed up before. Wanna

share one of those smokes with me and talk about it?” Though usually an acutely private man, there was something about her gaze and the horrendous nature of Finneas’ day as yet that made him concede and wait for her to pull down the metal front of the stand and put up her “Back in 15 minutes” sign.

They went around the back and she pulled out a lighter and lit up one of the celestially thin, smooth cigarettes. She inhaled slowly, blissfully, as though the entire world could wait for her to finish her cigarette. When she exhaled she blew a smoke ring and there was a tiny smear of her bright-red lipstick on the filter. Finneas was intoxicated. “So, “she began, in her buttery Marilyn Monroe-esque voice, “call this free therapy. What’s eating you?” and she smiled. Finneas stuttered for a moment, and knew he couldn’t tell her anything, not with words anyway.

He told her everything three hours later as they lay in his bed, as naked as Adam and Eve, though neither of the latter was quite as fucked-up as the former. Finneas felt like the atomic bomb inside him had dissipated. Her name was Maroon, veritably and beautiful and fantastic as she herself was.

She called his father when he couldn’t.

Finneas showered while she made the call, and he hadn’t felt clean like that for thirty years. The vile succubus on his chest had been banished.

He walked back into his bedroom stark naked as Maroon was hanging up the phone. She smiled at him and said, “She’s fine. They’re all fine, ‘cept they haven’t seen the light of their life for thirty years. Your dad’s been clean for fifteen years, and your

sister has a ten-year-old. She didn't call because after thirty years she figured you'd gotten sick of getting a message you never returned. They want to see you."

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course."

Finneas dressed quickly and they climbed into his car. She held his hand during the entire two-hour drive. There were times he thought he might crush her delicate little fingers with his nervous grip. They listened to music he loved when he was a teenager and sang at the top of their lungs. She'd awakened something in him, something that had been buried for a very, very long time. She turned the volume back up on the muted stereo of his life.

They arrived at his parents' house just as twilight was conceding to night that Tuesday, and she held his hand as he rang the door bell, and the door was opened, and he was swept into a giant embrace with father, mother, sister, niece and Maroon all at once and he, Finneas Brokenshire MacDougall, felt alive on that Tuesday for the first time in thirty years.