

I didn't always have a Second Birthday.

For the first twenty years of my life, I celebrated one birthday a year, which is, after all, a perfectly reasonable standard to follow. Each year, the candles on the cake would faithfully represent my new age. I would blow the candles out (usually after a few tries – I blame the asthma) and then I would tackle the gifts. But then came my other birthday, and I have not been able to blow those candles out, even after all this time, because those flames are made of something that could withstand even hurricane force winds. According to this particular birthday I am hardly older than sixteen.

I was alone in my dorm room at the start of that first second birthday. Well, that is not exactly true. In fact, I was very much *not* alone. I don't think I have ever been so *not alone* in my whole life. No, there was a very important Guest at my birthday, and He was to change everything. Or perhaps I should say that *I* was the guest at my very own party, for I knew not what to expect. In fact, I didn't even know it would *be* my birthday.

It was mid-January. You're familiar with that season, I'm sure: when the Christmas lights have dimmed, and the resolutions of the new year begin to falter slightly, as they face the prospect of a long winter. Like so many others that year, I was very tired. But on this day, the restless exhaustion was kept at bay, and my mind was granted a quiet moment - and in that moment, I opened a Door, an act I have come to understand as an instance of grace-filled curiosity. To my unexpected delight, I stumbled upon a roaring fire, most graciously prepared by the Host, the Keeper of the Keys of this Door I had so mischievously opened. My Host was remarkably kind, especially given that He had been waiting for me for quite some time. And He must have known that I loved a good roaring fire. The way the flames scramble higher and higher, as though in fast pursuit of some unearthly goodness...but this was no ordinary fire; quite unlike the ones I have watched my father prepare in the waning hours of chilly afternoons.

Now, as I still did not know it was going to be my birthday, I cautiously approached this intriguing, yet inviting, fire, and found it was much warmer and brighter than anything I had ever encountered. Like a hot drink on a winter's evening, a tender and generous Spirit sent an inexhaustible heat to the very tips of my fingers and toes. It started in my heart, but soon began flowing through my veins, as though the sensation was racing to find enough room to accommodate it. I was living something unfamiliar, but there was something also *strangely familiar* that told me I need not be afraid, as though I was in the safe company of a very close old friend with whom I had not corresponded in a very long time. I knew it would be foolish to turn away (although I was perfectly *free* to do so). And so I beheld the fire a bit longer. Before I knew it, my eyes had turned to waterfalls;

tears of an innocent and ancient joy that I had buried beneath my Self. I was dancing through my childhood again, those times that were undisturbed by the breaking of the world around it. My heart very nearly burst with the explosion of life and laughter, and it was Something greater than me that kept this still unnamed and un-tamed fervor from causing me to shout out my absurd and ecstatic contentment and peace. All my worries and doubts positively melted under the heat of this fire. I laughed yet again, this time at my own foolishness for having clung so long to what the world had been desperately trying to offer me.

At this point, my most gracious Host introduced Himself. And not only did He introduce Himself, but He even went so far as to ask me if He could make a dwelling place within me. "*Within me?*" I asked. Why ever would the Creator of such a Fire want to live inside *me*? Surely, the Maker of the Universe and the Father of Time has more impressive palaces to rest His most illustrious feet? I was not convinced (and still sometimes have my doubts) that the same power, who, by Speaking into the Void, created a world which so often shakes with such awesome force that even the oceans and mountains tremble, why that Power would descend into the depths of my often weary and weak soul. But the Host would hear nothing of my objections. What's more, He said (in His most gentle, healing whisper), *you are my daughter, whom I love*. Remarkable! What a day! Not only do I get a second birthday, but I am also introduced to a spiritual inheritance of which I knew nothing before. I became aware of an impressively long line of previously undiscovered ancestors, all of whom, I've since learned, were trying to tell me about this Promise all along...

And so it was time to leave my room, and take the party outside. I murmured a few hellos on my way to the door, anxious to see how this new (and still slightly odd) birthday gift would fare in the World Out There. Down and down the steps...there was still a part of me that hesitated, and wanted to retreat back to my little room, where I could carry on gazing wistfully at the Fire, in the presence of that most Special Host. But the path ahead called my name, and so I stepped out into the sunlight. Actually, I don't remember if it was a sunny day. It could have been the rainiest day on record, but as I felt that all the power of the Sun was shining inside me, I would not have noticed, nor cared. As far as I was concerned, the sun would never set again...

So I walked down paths that should have felt familiar and saw places and faces that should have been carved in my memory. And yet, somehow, it all looked New. I felt as though I could reach out and touch even the air itself, invisible as it was, but suddenly pulsating with essence and energy. The colors around me blossomed into life and even the unexciting Biology Department Building looked like a place I wanted to wander into, as though I might discover dragons or treasure there. Instead of wading through a messy collage of vague textures and

sounds, I was starting to notice how the world around me (including the mundane bits) had *definition* and *character*.

Each person, each smile, each frown...I was overwhelmed by the sensation that they were all part of a majestic and glorious Plan that was unfolding, even in that *very* moment. But come to think of it, it didn't even feel as though time was functioning in moments anymore, locked away in tidy minutes and hours and days. Time had burst from its prison, and I was suspended there, somewhere between this life and the next, this world and the world to come. At every turn, this new view was spectacular, though I am sorry to report that words can provide only a very inadequate description. And just as my sense of time had been altered, so was my perception of others; I was no longer walking past strangers. I believe my wonderful Host loved them as sons and daughters as well. His mercy had made friends of us all.

After an hour or so of wandering around, smiling goofily at people and inanimate objects, I returned home, where it had all started. Curiously enough, the feeling of warmth and excitement had not dwindled in the slightest during my little stroll. It was as though I had never actually left home, and that it was following me around like a stubborn, but most charming, shadow. I sat down in my chair, and if I had been any wiser, I would have shouted my thanks to the heavens.

And there we have it. A most *unusual* turn of events. I wasn't even looking for a second birthday, but it was certainly looking for me. I began to believe, in a new way, in those Good things that we imagine and hear about, even if it's only in soft-spoken rumors or whispers in a crowd. Nothing about that day was thunderous; I do not recall hearing any trumpets. If anything, it was as though God had invited me over for tea, and we conversed in front of a blazing fireplace. And as I was being happily overwhelmed, that strong and pure Fire gracefully seized the opportunity to break into my stubborn heart, in order to reveal to me, even if it was but for a short while, the true center of the universe. And I - thank goodness - was not the center. If (as I sometimes deceive myself into believing) I had been that all-knowing center, nothing about that exquisite January day would have been able to surprise me at all. And the surprise was one of the best bits. And I do wish there were more second birthdays to celebrate; that's an awful lot more cake to share.