

Yesterday

He let the cool air wash over him and closed his eyes. He licked his lips. *Chocolate. No, strawberry. No, both. And vanilla.* He opened his eyes, bent down, and plucked a Neapolitan ice cream cake from the bottom rack of the freezer, placing it carefully in the shopping cart.

He looked down at the cart. The cake, red and white balloons, and a sparkle-covered number 8 candle. Party hats and a HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner, both decorated with cartoon animals. Generic-branded cola and barbecue and sour-cream-onion chips. Styrofoam plates. Crepe-paper streamers. He continued to the check-out line.

“Kid’s birthday?” asked the cashier. “Looks like you invited the whole class!” She went on to describe her child’s most recent party.

“He had to have this specific cake, the brand-name chips, everything had to be blue. You know, he told me what napkin size to get—napkin size, can you believe that? It was his fifth birthday and he threw a fit about how we didn’t have any large napkins. Unbelievable.”

He smiled, keeping his eyes low. He said nothing. The cashier stared at him, expecting a comment, or at the very least, a laugh.

“Honey, you there?” she asked.

He tried to stutter a response, but nothing came out other than a squeak. He still didn’t look the cashier in the eye.

The cashier waited another moment before sighing and saying, “Alright, thirty-four-sixty-four.”

He paid and left.

Back at his apartment, He put the cake in the freezer and the other party paraphernalia on the kitchenette counter. He walked to his living room and closed his eyes. He frowned, concentrating. *Table at the center of the room. Banner on edge of table. Streamers—where were the streamers?*

He moved the coffee table, carpet, and sofa to the side and dragged his dining table to the center of the room. He grabbed a single chair and placed it at the head of the table. He poured the chips into two bright-yellow plastic bowls. He went to the pantry, retrieved a bag of popcorn, and poured it into a third bowl. He placed the three bowls next to the four bottles of cola, a stack of red solo cups, and the styrofoam plates.

He hung up the banner on the edge of the table with painter's tape. He used the same to hang up the streamers: a half-dozen above the door, and the rest on the ceiling, colors distributed evenly. Red, then green, then yellow, then blue, then orange, then purple, in neat rows.

He took the cake out of the freezer and placed it on the table in front of the chair. He placed the "eight" candles on the cake. Perfectly centered. He walked to a corner of the room so that he could see it in its entirety. He closed his eyes for a minute, and when he opened them he dissected everything in the room. He spent two minutes just standing still and looking. Comparing. He frowned. It wasn't right.

He went to the door and took the streamers down, redistributing them among the others on the ceiling, taking care to keep the color pattern consistent. He put the chair and the cake on the other end of the table.

He walked to the same corner and repeated his exercise. He frowned again. He was growing more frustrated. This time, it was the snacks, the banner, and the absence of music that were the issue. The popcorn wasn't right; he threw it out and replaced it with pretzel sticks. He started to take the HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner down—it was supposed to be above the door—when the doorbell rang. He put down the sign and walked to the door. He opened it more forcefully than he had meant to. He was greeted by a startled woman in an orange Little Caesars uniform holding three boxes. He realized he was glaring, and blushed, embarrassed. His heart quickened its pace, and he looked down.

“Forty-five-oh-nine,” she said. He murmured “sorry” and gave her \$50. He took the pizza—two cheese, one pepperoni, both large—and closed the door. He set the pizza at the end of the table opposite from the cake.

He went back to moving the banner. He grabbed a stool from the kitchen and hung it above the door, taking care to make sure that it was lopsided: slightly lower on the right than it was on the left.

He went to his bedroom and grabbed the clean Limp Bizkit CD he had begged his mother for. She wouldn't let him get the one with the “swears” in it. He went back to the living room and inserted the CD into his audio system.

He stepped back to his corner and repeated his exercise. He closed his eyes tightly, this time for five minutes. He imagined the banner, the snacks, the cake. The streamers, the generic-branded cola, the hats. The music playing in the background. He smiled. It was ready.

He walked around the room, admiring the decorations, from the multicolored streamer to the perfectly lopsided banner. He took a plate and ate two slices of pizza—only cheese, not pepperoni. He hated pepperoni. He ate some chips and drank a cup of the generic-brand cola that his mother had told him was more “economical”. He hummed along to the music playing. After he finished eating, he washed his hands and grabbed a knife, preparing to cut the cake. He paused the music and made his way over to the table. He was blushing, excited.

He sat down in the chair at the head of the table, in front of the ice cream cake. He withdrew a Bic lighter from his pocket, lit the eight candle, and closed his eyes. He shut them tight, tight, tight, until they ached.

He heard children laughing and chatting. He opened his eyes and saw his friends standing around him. They were pushing and jostling to get closer to the birthday boy. His mother leaned down over his shoulder, struck a match, and lit the “eight” candle. And then the singing began: twenty children and his mother, all off-key and out of tune. But it was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. He looked around the room and looked at everything: the empty pizza boxes, the cola, and the chips; the banner, the streamers, the balloons; and the twenty smiling faces wearing animal party hats.

The song ended and the group cheered. He closed his eyes, soaking up the sights, the sounds, and the feelings. He opened them, and he realized he was crying. The laughter, the cheers, the friends, and his mother were gone. It was just him, all alone, without anybody there to sing, to cheer, to listen. The “eight” candle was dripping wax onto the cake.

He spent the few hours cleaning up the party decorations. Down came the banner, the streamers, the balloons. In the garbage went the pizza, the cake, and the party hats. He threw away the remaining chips, the soda, and the styrofoam plates.

He found himself staring at the jumble in the garbage can. All the memories of his birthday, the only evidence it had happened. Soon to be tossed carelessly in the trash, to be taken, crushed, and incinerated. All those supplies had so much use left in them, so much potential. How needless it had been; all that effort wasted on just one person.

He stared at the mess, slowly collapsing onto itself, and stood there staring at it. He resolved to get rid of it tomorrow, or the day after. He would take care of it later.

He began trudging away from it, back to his bedroom, when he stopped. If he ignored it, it would start to smell. He had to do something about it soon.

He woke up the next morning to a clean house. He had cleansed the remnants of the previous day. Everything was behind him.

It was a new day.