

The Birthday Card

By

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Inspired by

A close friend

I still think of that birthday card at the oddest of times. It's been countless years since it was first given to me, and almost as many since I lost it. But even with the disparity of time between my ownership of the card and the years without it to hold in my hands, the memory of it is still as clear as a crystal in my mind.

As I've grown older, the card just comes to me as if out of the clear blue sky. As I stand stocking books on a shelf at the library, the image of David Sedaris on the front will suddenly appear in front of me. The smoke curling out from his lips like it's own entity, drawing your eye almost as much as the curve of his chin, the dead stare of his eyes.

You could almost feel the contours of his face, and in fact, I would sometimes close my eyes and it was as if I was caressing the side of his cheek, leathered by years of smoke. At least that's the way I imagined it, under the tips of my fingers.

I'm not quite sure where I lost the card. At the time I received it, it really didn't seem all that important. It was a nice gesture from good friends, the kind you have in your mid-twenties. The kind who can sit out drinking at a bar until all hours of the night and still make it in to work in the morning.

I remember looking over the card that night at the bar. Feeling the patchwork of the various images taped together. Reading the happy birthday messages, cleverly inserted throughout. The crossword on the front, with the words Happy Birthday Katie cleverly inserted in the columns that fit the words. Holding the card in my hands, I was proud to have the friends I did, and at that time sure I would never lose them.

As the years went by, the friends left my memories. Now, all that's left of them is crumbled reflections of a time when I was younger and three names. I recall elegance tempered by intelligence, fashion without the fakeness. Beyond that there is nothing. Not even a name. For years I held their names in my mind. Their names were synonymous with the card, and I thought a part of it.

My husband once asked me why I held the card in such high regard. It was sweet. He didn't remember the card, men don't remember things like that. He only remembered it through me, through my memories of it, and it was sweet that he was so considerate.

I answered him with what I thought the truth, that it reminded me of those people from that time. It's not to say that it didn't, but I've since realized that's not what was so special about the card. If it was, would I really have forgotten them?

No, it's something else. Something more. I've often thought that it might be something in the images. The images that have never left my mind, the images that still pop up on the insides of my eyelids before I go to sleep at night. The Eiffel Tower, stretching up and out over Paris. The tiger cub, nose turned down with drowsy eyes. The shark, reading a book underwater.

I go over these images again and again, and I never find an answer. I never see what makes it so special. What makes it stand out above any other card I've ever received in my life. Birthday cards. Christmas cards. Anniversary cards.

I keep all of these cards in a shoebox in my closet. I take them out and go through them from time to time, but none of them stick. It's why I keep them, so as not to forget. Each time I take them out, it's like looking at them for the first time. Every time I pull them from their box they seem as if brand new. It's as if the memory of that birthday card leaves room for no other.

Some nights I go over the names in my mind, hoping it will open something up. Tim. Gretchen. Alison. They have left my memories, but their names are forever there, attached to that card. I can see the long streak of the

the T in Tim. The swirl of the N in Alison. The strength of the letters in Gretchen.

Once, the birthday card came to me on the 101. I was off to see my son's varsity soccer game when a truck rumbled by with a cherry pie painted on the side. Suddenly I could see the cherry pie section in the birthday card, lodged in the upper left corner of the interior of the card.

The way it always made me taste cherry pie on the tip of my tongue, more so than even the taste of real cherry pie ever could. It was the taste of true cherry pie as only I could imagine it, a taste that could never be replicated in the real world. A taste that could only exist in my mind.

Sometimes I banish the birthday card from my mind. I try not to think about it. It rarely works. The card has become a part of me, and I have become the cards living legacy. The card will only die with me, only exist with me.