

Birthday Surprise

Nancy's mother regretted ever buying her daughter the brass wishing lamp.

She had found it in an old, dusty shop in town—one of those stores with “antiques” that were mostly junk. The lamp reminded Nancy's mother of her daughter's favorite cartoon, so she brought the lamp home with her and placed it in a large box, tying it with a bright red bow.

On Nancy's ninth birthday, she opened the box and pulled out the lamp. After peering inside to ensure it was empty, she rubbed the lamp and proclaimed, “I wish it was my birthday every day!”

Her mother laughed and brought out the cake—a tall construction with pink icing and purple rosebuds. Once Nancy ate her fill of cake, she played outside with her new toys until it was dark.

The next morning, Nancy's mother burst into her room, singing, “Happy birthday to you!” Nancy cried out in wonderment. Was it her birthday again, truly?

She opened her gifts and ate cake and ice cream. This time, it was a large sheet cake with blue buttercream frosting. Nancy had great fun riding her new bike around the neighborhood. Her friends squealed with excitement to see that she had gotten more presents.

As she fell asleep that night, she wondered if it had all been a dream. Surely she hadn't had two birthdays in a row.

But the next morning...

“Happy birthday, dear Nancy!”

The cake was mint green, a full three layers of chocolate.

Nancy's mother forced a smile on her face and cut the cake. Nancy didn't eat any cake that day because her stomach ached. She went to bed early.

Commented [AG1]: Oof, setting up the guilt - an act of love gone wrong!

Commented [AG2]: Oh, no, definitely the monkey's paw! I have definitely had a nightmare or two like this.

When she awoke, she discovered that she had bled during the night. Her mother fretted about early puberty.

Balloons and party hats helped Nancy forget about the cramping. She opened her gifts, exclaiming over each doll and tea set. By the evening, though, she was lying in bed, crying that her legs hurt. Her mother tried to soothe her with a heating pad.

“They’re growing pains, my love,” Nancy’s mother said tiredly before dragging herself to the grocery store to buy more flour and sugar.

After five more birthdays, Nancy realized her body was indeed changing. Her hips and chest rounded, and her height increased by several inches. In fact, Nancy was nearly unrecognizable.

“Mama,” she cried, “what’s happening to me?”

Terror gripped Nancy’s mother. She wept over her plate of cake and ice cream, and she wrapped presents late into the night.

Ten days later, Nancy awoke to her parents singing “Happy Birthday” once again, and she put her hands over her ears. The music haunted Nancy in her dreams, following her everywhere. Her mother took her to doctors who poked and prodded, trying to explain the mystery of the girl who was rapidly aging.

The cakes tasted like ash.

Wrapping paper lay strewn around the house like shredded bits of snow. The garbage bins overflowed with ribbons and party hats and paper plates.

“Please, make it stop,” the young woman Nancy had become begged the brass lamp. The lamp said nothing, even though she wished and wished. When her mother opened the bedroom

Commented [AG3]: I think there is significant room here in the middle to add visceral imagery - her body is going through changes, so how might her mother handle her clothes? Does she watch her daughter burst out of her childhood dressed, wear her hand-me-downs years before she was prepared for her to?

How might the smell of the house change from the smell of sweet sugar to the smell of sweet sugar to decaying flowers and rot?

Commented [AG4]: You mention “parents,” but there’s no other mention of the father here. This is definitely an area you can expand if you choose to add his character in- what does he do in this story?

Commented [AG5]: They poked and prodded, but what other actions did they take? Was she held in a facility for any amount of time, or were they dismissive of her and her mother’s claims?

Commented [AG6]: Great imagery here!

door for the twentieth day in a row and began to sing, tears streaming down her cheeks, Nancy threw the lamp at the wall. It dented the plaster and fell to the floor silently.

Her mother had wrapped nearly everything in the house by now, gifting her the toaster and some spoons on her thirtieth birthday. Nancy swiped the beautiful yellow cake onto the floor and ran from the house, tripping over her long legs.

Every morning, Nancy's mother sobbed her way through the song, and then they had cake. Nancy's teeth began to rot from her head. Kitchen appliances filled her bedroom. Her mother had started in on the den's bookshelf as well. Encyclopedias *A* through *F* laid stacked on Nancy's floor.

Nancy's mother took her to a psychic, who drew one card for her: the Nine of Cups. "Your cup runs over, my dear," said the woman cheerfully. "Your wish is being granted!" Nancy's mother wept bitterly and took her daughter home for cake and ice cream.

Nearly three months after her ninth birthday, Nancy moaned, "Help me." She lay in bed, frail and thin. Her dry lips searched for moisture. Nancy's mother held her daughter and rocked her, brushing white hair back from her face. Nancy's breaths began to slow. Her mother sat a party hat on her head and whispered, "Blow out the candles, baby."

Nancy took one shallow breath and stilled, her muscles slackening.

Nancy died on her ninety-fourth birthday. She was just nine years old.

Commented [AG7]: Did Clara's mother ever attempt to get rid of the lamp? Maybe they tried to throw it away but it kept reappearing - that, or maybe they took it to doctors, priests, and even the psychic to try and find answers. What measures could they have tried that makes their suffering seem all the more desperate?

Commented [AG8]: God, the compulsion of it all is the worst - reminds me of the backrooms. It's almost liminal.

Commented [AG9]: This is certainly dark, but I wonder if the woman was informed of Clara's condition or if her mother tried to keep it a secret - if that's the case, her shame/fear certainly adds an element worth digging into!

Commented [AG10]: I love the juxtaposition of this!