

# Make a Wish

by

Geoff Gillette

[Gilletteclan@adelphia.net](mailto:Gilletteclan@adelphia.net)

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"Happy Birthday, dear Daddy, happy birthday to you." I stifle a grimace as I watch forty years of candlelight reflected in my children's eyes. For their sake, I paste a smile on as they urge me to blow out the candles, sealing my fate. Forty years old!

It's not right, I tell you. Only yesterday, I was eighteen and skinny. I wasn't married to the same woman for ten years, with two kids. I was young. I had college to look forward to. I had hair for God's sake. Now I'm forty, fat and bald.

Three-year-old Ben climbs into my lap. "Hippee birfday, big wadamelon," he announces. No one knows or cares why he calls everyone a watermelon. It's cute and he enjoys it. My wife, Linda, laughs as seven-year-old Zoe plants a kiss on my cheek and tells me I'm old. As if I didn't know.

"Make a wish," Zoe cries, "then we can open presents."

A wish? Ok, here's my wish. I don't want to deal with getting old. I blow out the candles as I throw out a fervent plea to be absolved from the aging process.

The children laugh as only half the candles go out on my first try. I close my eyes to savor their joy.

Blink.

When I open my eyes, two numeral candles have replaced the small forest fire. A 5 and a 0. I look around in surprise. My shock only deepens as I see a young man sitting to my left and a woman to my right.

Ben has his first growth of mustache and Zoe is beautiful in her University of Colorado sweatshirt. People I don't even know surround the table. I rub my eyes to clear them.

Blink.

The group is gone, replaced by two little girls standing to either side of me. They favor their mother. Zoe looks beautiful in the flower of womanhood. A single blue candle decorates the small cake in front of me. "Make a wish grandpa," they call.

Puzzled, I look around. Spying the glance, Zoe says, "Ben will call, Dad. He's working on his thesis. You know how important it is." Not truly understanding, I nod. Leaning forward I take a deep breath to blow out the candles and without thinking I shut my eyes.

Blink.

An old woman sits across the table from me. A cupcake with a single candle is between us. Linda smiles, wrinkles in her face revealing the road map of her life. I stare down at the swollen, leathery hands lying before me on the table, wishing I had traveled the path she had. Seen the things she had seen, instead of flickering from birthday to birthday. "It's not fair," I tell her. "I'm not supposed to be this old."

Her eyes shine in the faint light as she nods. Even now, she is as beautiful as the day we met. She smiles as if she understands. "Happy birthday old man." I try to keep my eyes open, as the tears slip down my craggy visage. It is a losing battle, I know. Soon enough I will close them, and I will be 80. Not long after that, it will finally be over. I swipe at the tears.

Blink.

Several voices sing, many off key. As the hated refrain trails off, I open my eyes. I am in a wheelchair surrounded by people in pastel colored uniforms. A middle-aged man and a teenaged boy kneel before me, holding a plate of cookies. I know he is my son, but only as an abstract. The memories of his boyhood, teens and adulthood throb distantly in my heart like a shadow of remembered pain.

The man smiles, "Happy birthday Dad."

Under my breath I add, "You big watermelon."

The boy frowns and turns to my son. "What does that mean, Dad? Big watermelon?"

My son, a man grown, smiles sadly at me. "I don't know, hon. Sometimes grandpa says things that just don't make sense." Inwardly I wince that the small piece of my baby's history is gone forever.

Taking note of my surroundings I ask, "Where is your mother? Where is our home?" The look of pain on my baby's face tells me that "big watermelon" isn't all that's in the past. He chokes on an answer, as the teenager awkwardly pats him on the back.

I don't want to be here. Not in this place, not in this chair. I should be with Linda. Softly, I whisper to my son, "Goodbye," and I close my eyes again.

Blink.

It is so dark. Why can't I move? Wait, I can't hear my heart beating. I'm not breathing. I've reached the end. Why then haven't I joined my beautiful wife? Why am I still here? I try to speak, but no words come. I am a bundle of gristle and bone, locked in a box in the ground.

Oh God, oh Jesus, there has to be more. This can't be it. I can't feel my eyelids, don't even know if they're open, but in my mind I shut them again and again and again.

Blink.

Blink.

Blink.

Darkness surrounds me, I feel nothing. Do I still have a body? Am I nothing but dust? Where is heaven? Is this hell? Soundlessly I scream as eternity opens its maw before me.

Blink.

Blink.

Blink.