The Birthday Evening

Howard Robinson

When the weather was warm the drive home from campus usually took Martin less than half an hour. Normally he enjoyed the ride; his route bore him soon out of the downtown area and into a large municipal park, and then along the edge of the lake which bordered the park on one side for nearly a mile. In summer Martin occasionally stopped to walk casually along the lakefront, or to spend an hour studying on one of the warm stone benches. It would have been pleasant, in fact, to have stopped this evening, and to have tried to forget for a few moments the unpleasantness of the afternoon.

Tonight it was cold, however; the way out of the city was filled with long lines of ponderous, snow-laden traffic, and his progress was halted a number of times by the cumbersome maneuverings of city snowplows. It was the third storm in less than a week; and even as Martin traveled the winding road through the park, the large wet flakes continued to fall softly over everything. Later, along the lakefront, he observed the waves as they rolled in and broke up against great chunks of ice, which in some places were lodged in at the shore in heaps as high as a man.

At home he entered the apartment through the back door so as not to track snow into the living room. The kitchen smelled sweet and warm. Marian was slightly bent at the waist over the kitchen table, just finishing the work on a tall, pink cake. The cake had three layers, each layer smaller than the one below; on its stemmed, glass plate, it was neatly symmetrical.

"Hello," she said.

"What's the occasion?"

Marian didn't answer at first; her mouth firmly set, she was circling the middle layer with a cordon of white frosting, pausing every few inches to make a loop. In her slender fingers the writing instrument looked like a fat crayon held by a child. "It's Emily's

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birthday today. Robert called . . ." she hesitated for a moment, pricking delicately at the cake, "around noon, to see if I'd bake her a surprise." She stood straight for a moment and pushed the hair back from her face, then began on the top layer.

"I guess that means we'll be going over there tonight."

"For a little while. Isn't that all right?"

"I suppose so. I'd looked forward to staying at home this evening."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to stay home tonight, that's all."

"No, I don't mean that. You act as if something is wrong."

"Not really." He felt the edge in his voice. "The Press turned down my book today."

She stopped working and raised her head. It was the first time she had looked up since he had come in. For a moment she was quite still, her arms and hands motionless in front of her. In the pause, Martin came around the end of the table and eyed the cake. From this angle the symmetry was not as regular.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Did they say why?"

"No. There was a notice in my box. All it said was that a board of three readers, working independently of each other, had come to a unanimous judgment. Unquote."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know. Start over, I guess." He had been carrying an armload of books, which he now laid down on the table by the cake.

"I'm sorry," she said. She sat down slowly.

"It's all right; let's talk about it later. What's for dinner?"

"I don't know, I haven't even thought about it yet. This took so much longer than I thought."

Martin went into the other room and laid his keys on the bookcase. Automatically he turned on the television for the news and then went upstairs to change. The children were playing in the large bedroom; hearing him, they scrambled down from atop the bed and ran to be held. Martin picked them up, one in each arm. The boy had begun to lose the fleshiness that had recently characterized him, and had now taken on the appearance of a complete, miniature adult, save that the head was larger than the body seemed to require. Generally, he resembled Martin; the color of their eyes was a perfect match, and there were similarities around the mouth

and chin. Lately, the boy had become difficult to manage, especially for Marian; and Martin, in observing him at play, had discovered that his son didn't fit in well with the other children in the neighborhood. Martin felt that there was something they were doing wrong, though he didn't know what. Whatever it was, it hadn't affected the girl. She was at present merely passing through a stage of quiet shyness. She ate without being prodded, went to bed without difficulty, and demonstrated much love for an unwieldy array of stuffed animals. She currently showed four tiny front teeth.

Tonight, both of them seemed in good humor, and while balancing them in his arms, Martin pretended to listen with interest to something only partly intelligible about a toy, broken, which the boy held in his hands. Setting the children gently in turn down to the floor again, Martin took the thing into his own hands and attempted for a few moments to piece it together; then, fondling it rather absentmindedly he went to the head of the stairway and called down.

"What time did you plan to go over?"

There was no response at first. Martin waited, then heard her walk quickly across the uncarpeted living room. "What did you say?"

"I said what time did we plan to go over?"

"Oh. About 8:30 I imagine. Robert is taking her to dinner early; and then he and I thought it would be nice to get together afterwards for cake. We won't stay long—all right?"

"Did you get a sitter?"

"Yes."

"Who did you get?"

"Mona."

After dinner, while shaving, Martin decided that it would be pleasant after all to go out for the evening; perhaps food and light conversation could lift his depression. He dressed and went after the sitter, leaving his wife in the bedroom getting ready.

It was still snowing; the streets, however, were not yet slippery. At the sitter's home he pulled into the driveway and honked the horn. Mona appeared in the doorway, turned towards the inside and called something, then closed the door behind her and came down the front steps. She was a tall, long-legged, ample girl of eighteen, broad and woman-like through the hips, and tending to be rather slow in her movements. The summer before, when Martin had taken his family to the seashore for a few days, Mona was invited along to watch the children, though as it turned out, during the hot, sunny days on the beach she was asleep most of the time.

Mona wore glasses, great thick ones which she could not do without, and which caused her face to have a kind of scholarly look. Tonight as she entered the car, bringing the cold night air into the confines with her, she carried a staggering armload of books, including her customary Complete Works of a favorite poet—a heavily-thumbed brown book with a broken back.

The children were neutral towards her; they preferred another girl who lived nearer but who was not always available. Martin nonetheless enjoyed Mona's inquisitive and aggressive conversation, though sometimes, in its youthful naivete, it caused him to feel very old. She admired, he knew, his library and his stereo; she occasionally brought records of her own, which she played at such volume that the neighbors had once complained and he had had to talk to her about it. Martin sometimes got the impression from her attitude that should they happen to forget to pay her for her services she might never notice.

Tonight they rode together in relative silence, conversing only lightly about the weather and about her plans for college. She seemed content to watch through the window at the snowfall, and Martin suspected that he might have awakened her from a nap. He busied himself with the road and with the light frost on the windshield, which blurred their vision; and with the long, steep, almost treacherous hill which led down the street on which he lived.

At home Marian was ready and Martin helped her on with her coat; on an impulse he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the back of the neck, just above the coat collar. She shrugged away laughing, and clearly embarrassed, gave some instructions to Mona, who in any event had not seen, having already turned to her reading. Next to Mona on the sofa sat Martin Jr. with a book of his own, a small favorite one full of pictures of animals. The girl was upstairs, already asleep.

Martin went into the kitchen for the cake. To it had been added, since he had seen it, several red candy flowers; and a single white candle, somewhat larger and more substantial than the usual kind.

It was warm, almost musty inside. In the entryway Martin and Marian stamped the snow from their feet as Robert helped them remove their coats. Emily, now fully nine months pregnant, did not arise, but offered a greeting from where she lay resting on the sofa. Her shoes were on the floor, and she wore an old red shirt, one of Robert's, which billowed out unnaturally at the waist. She did not at first see the cake, which Marian had by now surrendered

over to Robert, until Robert had begun to cross the room to place it, in mock ceremony, at the center of the dining room table. Then, "Oh!" she almost squealed, "Marian, it's beautiful." She sat upright and gathered her legs beneath her, then extended her arm to grasp Marian's in a brief, fondling hold, to which Marian responded. Marian sat down beside her and for a moment there was quiet, the four of them captured as if in a photograph. Martin could sense the depth of feeling between the two women, and was strangely saddened not to be a part of it; Emily, having grown with Marian from childhood, knew his wife better than he himself did. The other couple would soon be leaving the area—a transfer within Robert's company—and Marian was taking it hard. Once lately he had found her in the corner of a darkened room, uncharacteristically despondent and crying softly about the thought of the separation.

"Happy birthday, Em," Marian said. "How is it to be twenty-three and pregnant?" It was a joke the four of them had; Robert and Emily had tried for three years to have children, and they had all laughed often about Emily's preoccupations with calendars and thermometers. Marian did not know it, but Robert had once confided to Martin that the results of tests had indicated that he, Robert, was responsible.

Marian handed Emily a birthday card. Martin had seen it at home. It was signed simply, in Marian's round, open handwriting, "Love to Emily from Martin and Marian."

Robert came in from the dining room and sat next to Emily on the sofa. Martin went to the large, soft chair opposite and dropped down into it. The television was on; Martin, sitting at an oblique angle to it, turned the sound down until it was almost inaudible, and for a few moments he studied the three across from him as they watched the flickering figures on the screen. It was quiet throughout the house. For some reason the usual noises from outside were not apparent tonight. There were no cars passing outside in the road; only the snow fell.

"How was the dinner?" Martin asked, to neither of them in particular, though he expected Robert to answer.

"It was very good," Emily said; "we went to a little place that Robert knows. It was a nice place."

Though Marian and Emily were about the same age, Marian's two children and a longer married life had made her seem years older. She had developed a tense, perhaps more nervous character than Emily, who tended to be playful, girlish. Like Mona, Emily

was ample and broad, and though not actually tall, gave the impression of being so, so that to stand next to her and to be aware of her actual height was always vaguely surprising. Her fingers were long and grasping, and her arms, too, seemed longer than they needed to be. Now, at the end of her pregnancy, she had seemed to turn the usually-unattractive roundness and fullness of the condition to her advantage.

Her husband was a research engineer, an innovator, a maker of concrete things: he was everything that Martin was not. While Martin spent his days in a small cubicle of an office in the basement of the humanities building, sharing space with two other research fellows, studying subtle shifts in the movements of art history, writing long, laborious treatises about naves in medieval churches, or the geometry of Byzantine mosaics, Robert was part of a development team in a laboratory filled with work tables and tools and business machines. He wore a shop apron and metal-toed boots, and his thumbs were callused from pushing cotter pins and twisting wires. When he pulled a handful of change from his pocket, there were always, among the silver coins, alligator clips and bits of wire solder and small condensers like tiny brown barrels. He had invented something recently which was too complex for Martin to understand, and for which his company had given him a cash award amounting to something in the lower five figures. While Martin respected this achievement it was vaguely unsettling to him to realize that in just a few months Robert would earn roughly four or five times more than Martin would earn in a year.

The evening passed quietly. Low, pleasant conversation alternated with an occasional program on television. The women talked unashamedly about pregnancy. Robert talked about his car. Martin withdrew into himself and became only half attentive to the evening. He found it quite agreeable just to sit and absorb the warmth and the talk and the others, and to try not to think at all of the day or of the snow outside. The big chair was soft and he was drowsy. Twice there was mild excitement as Emily felt, or rather thought she felt, pain. Robert sat up both times, tensely, and then both times Emily laughed it off nervously and the evening lapsed again into its drowsy pace. Towards the end of the evening Robert got up and motioned for Martin to follow. He picked the cake up from the dining room table and carried it into the kitchen.

"I've been looking at this for an hour," Robert said. "I'm ready to eat all of it."

Martin turned on the kitchen light—it seemed brighter than usual—and Robert began filling dishes with great scoops of ice cream. Watching Robert work, Martin realized that he himself had perhaps always admired the quality in some men of being particularly well-organized, noting even now how cautious Robert was in dishing the ice cream, careful not to spill. The contrast between them supported Martin's feeling that friendships are based, not on the similarities between two people, but on one's seeing in another the subdued and even latent characteristics in one's self.

It was Martin who lighted the stout candle, after a brief hunt for matches, and carried the cake into the living room. Robert turned out the lights, making the room completely dark away from the flickering yellow flame, so that Martin couldn't see anyone when he entered, and was for a moment aware only of his own presence. As he approached the sofa where Emily sat, the others came into view, and together they formed a rough circle. Martin bowed low at the waist, drawing nearer to her with the cumbersome thing in his hands, and for a moment the four of them were still. Martin looked at Emily. She was staring into the light; and water, glistening, had begun to well in the bottom of her eyes. "Make a wish," he said gently, "and blow the candle out."

Emily looked up and glanced briefly around the circle, then, taking a deep breath, and holding it for what seemed an interminably long time, her eyes closed, she sat quiet, rocking almost imperceptibly back and forth. In a moment she opened her eyes wide into the light and exhaled a brief, almost effortless sigh, which Martin could feel from where he stood. With the candle out it was completely dark in the room. There was some nervous laughter—it was Marian's—while Robert fumbled for the switch, and the flash of light caused them all to blink.

Martin set the cake on a low table next to the sofa, and Emily, leaning forward, cut the cake into large pieces and served it from where she sat. Martin pulled his chair in closer. The cake and ice cream were smooth-textured and delicious, and Martin ate slowly. Robert encouraged second helpings for everyone, and Martin took another scoop of ice cream and another large piece of cake onto his dish. Finishing the second helping, he was aware of lapsing again for a time into what must have seemed to the others a distant silence. The cake, mutilated, had become asymmetrical. The center was gone out of it and there was perhaps only a third of it left. Martin began to get, deep in his stomach, a feeling of nausea. Had

he eaten too much? He tried to ignore the feeling, but it wouldn't go away.

The others were discussing Robert. Emily went into the bedroom and came out again, holding in her hand a letter from which she began to read. She stood upright in the hall doorway, the white letter brilliant against the red background of her shirt. The letter was from Robert's prospective new boss in the company, who seemed to be praising intelligence and insight in one so young. There was something about looking forward to the association, and there was a proffered salary. Robert protested mildly over Marian's congratulations.

Martin became suddenly ill. There was no immediately apparent reason for it; it was simply that the nausea had become intense, had risen quickly in his throat and had begun to expand there. Feeling the need to vomit, and fearing that he might do so at once, he excused himself from the others and went into the bathroom, where, reeling, he leaned at the waist and retched violently and interminably into the stool. His chest ached deeply; his thoughts were not clear. As a child, his mother had always, when he was ill, placed her warm hand on his forehead, had patted his back lightly. He stood now for a moment, head bowed, arms outstretched and touching the walls for support; then spat and flushed away the pink remains, watching as they swirled and sucked noisily into the drain. The water helped. He rinsed his mouth with it, dried his face, and went out of the bathroom.

He padded quietly down the darkened hallway. Marian, he could hear, was discussing in hushed tones the failure of his project. Strangely, the mention of it now did not bother him, though even the thought of it earlier had been unsettling. He entered the room, causing among the others a silence and then a shift in the conversation. He felt slightly dizzy. He sat down in the soft chair, face in his hands; and then looking up, announced that he was ready to go home.

He arose and retrieved the coats from the closet, and amid half-hearted protests from Marian, and a questioning look from Emily, lifted Marian up from the sofa and onto her feet and helped her on with her coat. The four of them gathered at the door. There was some fumbling and bumping in the small entryway. Martin, his head throbbing, attempted to appear normal.

"Thanks," Emily said, "for the party."

"Such as it was," Martin said; then, turning to Robert, "Any definite plans about when you'll be leaving?" The topic had been

generally avoided during the entire evening.

"No. Within a month, I imagine."

"There'll be no more evenings like this," Marian said.

"No," said Robert. "But then maybe we'll be back soon."

Martin knew better. Before, in saying goodbye to others, he had learned something about it: that plans to meet later, or to take vacations together or to travel halfway across the country for a visit did not reach fruition; that there would be a few letters, and perhaps a chance meeting now and then, but that goodbyes, once made, generally signified the end of things.

Emily knew this too; he could sense that she did. And then, suddenly and surprisingly, she reached out to him with those long arms and fingers and took him to her in a brief, tight embrace, the bulbous stomach between them. The light, loose layer of skin on her back wrinkled under his hand. She broke from him slowly, touching his face with her hand, then turned to Marian and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Outside in the car, Marian immediately moved over close to him in the center of the seat, and together they viewed the snowstorm through the cleared space in the windshield. It was colder now, and the streets were iced over, making the driving difficult. There were no other cars out.

"Did you enjoy the evening?" Marian asked.

"It was all right. You?"

"You seemed unsettled."

"No. I ate too much cake."

"Emily mentioned it too. I told them I thought it was your book."

"I was just tired, I guess." He was not willing to admit, even to himself, exactly what was wrong. He was aware that the failure of the book was not a central problem, but simply a catalyst. And what bothered him there was not so much the loss of two years' work, but the realization that perhaps his judgment had been poor. He would concede to the anonymous, distinguished critics. And maybe another time, on another campus, in another cubicle, he would think it through again and rewrite it.

By the time they got home, Martin was feeling better. Mona was asleep, and he had to fumble for the key to get in. She was stretched out on her back on the sofa, her arms folded over her middle. A late-night television program was still on, the sound turned low. Marian leaned and shook her gently by the shoulders, and Mona awoke startled and reached for her glasses. Martin,

thirsty, went out into the kitchen for a glass of water, and Marian followed to get change from him. Marian always paid the sitter, and tonight almost without a word she put the money in Mona's coat pocket. Martin helped Mona on with her coat, and handed her the pile of books she had brought to study from. She was still half asleep.

In the car Mona stacked the books neatly between them in the seat; and except for a brief discussion regarding the children, they rode to her home in silence. Mona sat rather stiffly, her hands in her lap, and seemed to be cold as she peered through the thick lenses at the storm. Martin turned the heater up higher.

Later, as Mona left the car, with one long leg poised briefly in the air ready to step out, and with her books clasped tightly in her arms across her chest, Martin suddenly understood what it was he had fought against all evening—realized that for the second or perhaps third time in a few hours he had experienced feelings of covetousness, jealousy. He was jealous of Mona, this tall girl who was young, whose life had not as yet become complex, and whose enjoyment came still from simple things; and he was jealous too of Robert, whose life was in order and whose future was clear, definite, and secure.

On the way back home from Mona's house Martin noticed that the snow had nearly stopped falling. At the same time, however, the streets had become even more difficult, deceptively so, so that twice on the way home Martin lost control of the car: once as he slid partway into a deserted intersection against the red light; and once again as he felt the wheels break loose in a quite gentle curve of the road. His old, heavy-lugged tires were no longer of service.

And again, as Martin began to descend the long, steep hill near where they lived, his stomach contracted when the car failed to respond either to the brakes or to the wheel, carrying him into a long, uncontrollable skid. Quickly he whirled the front wheels away from the direction of the sliding. He pumped the brakes rhythmically with loud, jerking thumps which didn't help. The car banged into the curb halfway down the hill, then jolted away, reversing direction, and continued on down, facing upwards. Martin could only wait. He prayed. Near the bottom of the hill the road curved sharply; the obstinate machine, failing to respond to the change in direction, headed again towards the curb. Martin remembered a low guardrail somewhere; and then with a jolt, almost soundlessly,

one rear wheel hit the curb and jumped it, and the car came to rest with the other three wheels on the street.

The whole thing had taken only a few seconds. Martin sat quietly for a moment, his hands shaking against the wheel, his arms and legs feeling weak and useless. He got out. There seemed to be no damage to the car. He looked up at the sky. Here in the hollow at the bottom of the hill there was wind. It whipped noisily against the trees, and seemed to turn them inside out; the tiny leaves faced inward, their backs against the wind and against the cold light from the streetlamp. Martin pushed his coat collar up at the back of his neck.

He would put chains on when he got home. He hoped the car wasn't stuck here; he couldn't leave it—it was blocking part of the roadway. He got back into the car, which was still running, and put it into forward gear. The car lurched forward, then stopped, one rear wheel spinning. He couldn't get the car to move at first; then, rocking it backwards and forwards, the engine racing, he was able to shake it loose. It dropped from the curb, then glided around the rest of the curve for one block to his driveway.

Marian was still up. He told her what had happened. She agreed that he should put on the chains. He dressed warmly in some old clothes, found a pair of leather work gloves, and went out again. Removing the chains from the trunk of the car, he draped them over his arms and straightened them out, then laid them ladder-like in the snow. They were difficult to mount and in several places it was necessary to wire some of the links down. His fingers became numb inside his gloves. It was, however, almost pleasant out now in spite of the cold. From where he lay in the snow he could see beyond the dark shadow of the car the almost pale blueness of the sky; it was as if the clouds had emptied their contents onto the ground and then had absented themselves. The stars were distinct, and somewhere beyond his vision shone a pale light from the moon. For a few moments, he experienced a feeling of quiet, of consonance.

The job took about half an hour. When the chains were secure he brushed the snow from his coat, got into the car and drove it to the corner and back. There was a clatter and an attendant vibrating rumble as the car moved surely and steadily down the road. He turned about and came back, pulling into the driveway. He got out of the car and closed the door, and stood by it for a moment, noting now the white intensity of the lighted snow. Then, in a ges-

ture of complete acquiescence, he fell back into it, checking his fall with a gloved hand, coming to rest firmly into a bank at the edge of the driveway, which accommodated his back and neck rather comfortably. He didn't feel the cold at all now, and the dampness didn't come through the layers of clothing for several minutes. It was quiet. From somewhere behind him he heard the slow trickling of water. A dog passed close by, sinking to its body, saw him, and stopped, poised and stiff. Martin spoke to it in low tones, carried on, in fact a rather low, quiet conversation with it as it relaxed into the snow. Martin remembered for a moment something, something in his simple and elemental youth that had been similar to this in some way, and then lost the thought, recalling now only the pleasant emotion it had aroused. He removed his gloves and made a small, lightly-packed ball; and in a quick sidearm motion hit the unsuspecting animal neatly in the hindquarter. The dog stumbled and ran, then after a brief pause, looking back, trotted briskly away. Martin sat for another moment or two beginning to feel the cool dampness, then got up and went into the house.

Inside, he found Marian on the telephone in a state of happy excitement. She was speaking to Robert, she said, who was phoning to say that Emily was feeling pains at regular intervals. Wasn't it wonderful?

Martin removed his outer clothing and left it in a heap on the welcome mat. Yes, he thought, it was. Marian's voice receded as he climbed the stairs and went into the bedroom. His fingers smarted from the cold; he felt very awake as he undressed and got into his nightclothes. He went into the other bedroom where the children were, and covered them. The girl was asleep on her side, her back snug against the bars of the crib. Martin Jr. lay on his back, his mouth partly open, his hands clenched into little fists. The broken toy lay in pieces on the floor; perhaps Martin could repair it tomorrow.

Marian came up behind him and circled his waist with her arms. He could sense her happiness. Neither of them spoke. As they separated, Martin went into the bathroom to wash his hands. The water was too warm and hurt his fingertips; he wondered if he had been frostbitten. In the bedroom, Marian had gotten into bed and begun to read a magazine. A small reading lamp over the headboard cast a limited glow about the room. As Martin got into bed and moved next to her, she shut the magazine with a light, final, smacking sound and dropped it to the floor.

When the reading lamp went out the room became totally dark; drapes, heavy over the windows, did not allow the light of the moon to enter. The darkness seemed to intensify, and in its intensity Martin experienced the frightening sensation of being pressed from above, of becoming smaller. He imagined the walls to be widening, lengthening; the ceiling to be moving outward; the room becoming as great as the inside of one of his cathedrals, himself a small living thing in the center of the nave. He felt to raise his arms in the attitude of prayer, but the pressing seemed to weigh him down and a fear of the darkness beyond the covers restrained him. His breathing became quick, his chest contracted, he became terrified. The body lying next to him rolled over and faced him whispering out of the deep softness of the covers quiet, soothing words. Gradually the fear was dispelled, and the eyes, adjusting to the darkness, came to distinguish the outlines of the room. He was feverish, he knew, possibly quite ill; and in his heat, exhausted, disillusioned, yet reconciled, he felt himself falling deeply and heavily into a long, numbing sleep.