

PRAYER FOR EIGHTY CANDLES

If I have any muscle left with you, please, tell them not to do it. They wouldn't do it! Who needs a cake with eighty candles -- waxy-stiff and tilted like gravestones? I am just too old for a party. I attend funerals now; three already in the past few months. In each burnished box a friend for more than sixty years. Each of us conjoined in sin. Guilty since sixth grade when we shoved and jostled for our turn to french kiss Barbara MacMurty. Tell me, what ever happened to Barbara -- the savior of fumbling boys from Our Lady of Mercy? Next week, you know, she is going to let us touch her through her underwear. Funny, at the moment I cannot conjure even one of the widows' faces, but I can taste Barbara's lips, ham and cheese, apple and breath mint.

Please God tell them, not eighty candles. I will surely ignite; what with so many sources to touch off a fire, and my body, as dry as kindling these days, not a drop of moisture left in my stiff bones and shriveled up skin. I can just picture it, eighty coruscating and grotesque fingers, like gravestones, sitting smugly on a cake. It will have to be made completely of dark, dark chocolate. They know it is my favorite. The kids used to find my hidden stashes, tucked away for stolen bites long before anyone discovered flavonoids and free radicals and pronounced -- against everything that came before -- a candy bar a day helps keep the heart attack at bay. Too bad antioxidants cannot cure eighty years of guilty noshing.

Now they want to celebrate, but I am safe today. Just going out to lunch with my son. My son, who, I guess you have noticed, now has more grey hairs than brown. My son, whose first real job after college I am sure you are aware I still take credit for. How can we be going out to lunch to talk about investments and his end game strategies; to

talk to my son about his son's first real job after college? It will be a wonder if the cake does not collapse from the weight of all the candles; because my candles begat other candles and they begat more candles, and those candles seem poised on the verge of spectacular creation. But there will be no cake, no candles, no smiling guests because it is my party, isn't it? And I am not in the mood.

You tell me. What is there to celebrate? Eighty candles are for old men who can view their life like a Hollywood movie. You know, filmed with one of those fancy filters so the whole damn thing can be seen as a seamless, slightly blurry, transition from good to better. For old men who can nod their head at the end of the reel and say, "it is good," and know they are done. When I sit in this easy chair -- which is too damn much of the time since the surgery, and I'll have you know I'm not happy about that. When I look back all I see is a scattered pile of snapshots screaming for order.

Ha, you must be getting old too. Did you, in your forgetfulness, leave out my file on the celestial porch rocker side table -- with a forgotten storm coming -- so the record of my moments on this earth got blown and jumbled, and shoved back together by the angel interns in no apparent order, and with no regard to how I might feel about the matter? Because suddenly I am not eighty, I am nineteen behind the wheel of my first car and my bully of a father is demanding that I let him drive. I have not moved an inch off this damn chair but I can feel myself steeling for his fist. And then as suddenly I am ten. I peek into the guest room and see my mother nurse Uncle Pete. How come she never nursed me ever so gently through my string of childhood diseases? Never mind. It is Uncle Pete who is surely dying. Uncle Pete who is not my father but who provides for us, gave us, in fact, the house we live in, Uncle Pete, who I somehow know without being

told, is not really my uncle. Why does it seem like I can reach out and touch my mother's hair? Now thirteen, an alter boy bent piously on the kneeler, my hands clasped together in prayer and penitence. I know I look the image of pure devotion. My tongue is stuck out (wobbling from the awkward pause) waiting for its moment of grace. And the priest pauses in front of me and pulls back his hand. My tongue pulls back empty and humiliated. (Did I put the communion wine back in the wrong place?) How can I still feel my cheeks flushed with boyhood shame when my wife of fifty years is calling me for lunch?

Apparently you and your staff have recorded everything, every blip and flaw, each stumble and humiliation. Do I have to account for it all now? Must eighty candles be lit? One for each sin -- are they mortal, or mere venial, that you are counting? I envy the ones with Alzheimer's. For me it is still all up here in that jumbled pile of snapshots. And, for your interest, I am *not* done yet. I suppose I should be thankful for the images, but it is not enough; it feels like it will never be enough. It all still matters to me. When did I stop mattering? There is not going to be a party or cake, is there? I should know better. It is entirely too much trouble to get the whole family together.

I still am a conscientious father, you know. I try to call, but they are all online and out the door and, damn, I'm too old for such nonsense. I just cannot get used to it. I want to hear their voices, see their awful handwriting, the flaw I passed on to each and every one of them. Anyway, my children now are setting their own children free. How can they need me? Hell, you watched, you know that I ran a careful, resilient business...for all those years. But it has gone on just fine without me. Thank you very much. My wife will survive. She got a good thoroughly flawed husband out of the

bargain, but she will always be stronger than me. And don't tell me to make new friends. I already was a good friend. Okay maybe a bit too quick to find fault, but I tried and I'm tired of the dying. New friends equal new funerals; it will wear me out. And what about you? You know better than anyone how much I struggle to believe; to prove myself to you. Even you have grown weary of this arid old man with his curdled heart, haven't you? Do I have nothing left to offer?

There is the damn doorbell again. That will be my son. Why is my wife not answering the door? Well, he will just have to wait while I get out of this damn chair. You will have to wait too. Do not go and disappear; I am not done talking to you. And remember to tell them -- no cake with candles.

Oh my god. You went and let them do it. They are all here, squeezed into the narrow, airless hallway -- there cannot be enough oxygen for all of them. Perched expectantly at the doorway, they will run me over like a gaggle of chickens and put that damn cake down on my trampled body. Did you ever notice the ugly grimace left by the aftertaste of "SURPRISE!?" Children and spouses pour in -- even ex-spouses I see, and girlfriends, and grandchildren and boyfriends, every last one of them. Which one of your cosmic jokesters decided that the same cluster of grandchildren as children should spill out of the candy box -- the same serving size and amount of each flavor -- boys and girls; that when I look at my grandchildren two, three, even four, decades should simply vanish and I am looking at my own children. I am young, and they are young, and they look at me like I hung the moon? "Pop Pop" -- the youngest from the here and now is wrapped ravenously around my leg, and you knew it didn't you, that some moisture remains. Enough to let slip a silent tear through the narrowed cataract slit that once saw clearly.

Enough to remind me why I remain.