CHAPTER 1

Seventy-Five. Well, This Calls for Cake.

The first sign that your family is planning something is that they begin behaving casually.

Very casually.

So casually that your daughter calls on a Tuesday to ask whether you own a cake stand.

“Why?”

“No reason.”

There are many questions a person might ask for no reason. Whether you have a cake stand is rarely one of them.

“What kind of cake stand?”

“Just a regular one.”

“Glass or ceramic?”

A pause.

“I’ll call you back.”

You have not reached seventy-five by failing to notice when someone is standing in your kitchen, mentally measuring it for a buffet.

A few days later, someone asks whether you will be home on Saturday.

You say probably.

They ask whether you could be more definite.

You explain that you live there.

This is apparently insufficient.

“Could you make sure you’re home around two?”

Now, if the plan is to surprise you, this is an interesting approach. It narrows the possibilities considerably. Either your family is throwing a party or the cable company has finally committed to an arrival time.

You decide to cooperate.

There is pleasure in letting people believe they are getting away with something. You have provided this service for years. You provided it when a small child hid a Mother’s Day present behind a curtain with both feet still visible. You provided it when a teenager announced that the dent in the car had “always been there.”

You can provide it again for a birthday.

Saturday arrives, and you dress for the occasion nobody has mentioned.

Nothing elaborate. Just something comfortable that also photographs well, because experience has taught you that a person can be ambushed by a camera at any gathering involving frosting.

At one forty-five, someone suggests you go into the backyard.

“Why?”

“It’s nice out.”

You glance through the window. Three folding chairs are making their way down the side of the house.

Apparently, the weather is bringing its own seating.

When the moment finally comes, people shout “Surprise!” with such enthusiasm that you briefly worry about the neighbor’s dog.

You do your part.

You put a hand to your chest. You widen your eyes. You say, “Well, look at all of you!”

It is a sincere reaction. You knew something was happening. You did not know your friend had driven two hours to be there, or that someone had found a photograph of you on a bicycle you had completely forgotten owning.

That is how a surprise party works at seventy-five. The logistics may be obvious. The affection can still catch you off guard.

Then you see the decorations.

There is a banner announcing your age in letters large enough to be useful from an aircraft.

You have never understood this part.

For most of the year, people are discreet about numbers. They lower their voices to discuss the price of a roof repair. They turn over receipts at restaurants. They refer to a neighbor’s salary as “very comfortable.”

Your age, however, has been hung between two trees.

Someone has also purchased napkins with a message about being seventy-five and fabulous.

You appreciate the vote of confidence.

You do wonder why fabulousness requires so much disposable tableware.

Soon, the photographs begin.

One with the family.

One with your friends.

One with the people who were in the first picture but are now holding their drinks in the other hand.

“Let’s get a candid!”

Everybody freezes.

You have appeared in enough photographs to know that a candid picture usually requires more direction than a wedding ceremony.

“Just act natural.”

You were acting natural before six people told you where to put your elbow.

Eventually, someone brings out the cake, and the entire operation acquires focus.

A cake is an excellent way to organize a group. Conversations stop. People locate plates. Those who claimed they were “too full for anything” begin examining the available portions.

There are candles.

Perhaps a seven and a five, a practical arrangement.

Perhaps enough individual candles to suggest that someone at the store offered a discount.

You consider the arrangement.

“Should we open a window?”

The singing begins.

Your name is stretched into several notes it has never needed before. Two people start in different keys. Someone joins halfway through and attempts to catch up.

It is wonderful.

When the song ends, everybody watches you make a wish.

This is a private matter, though the family leans forward as if you might announce it at a shareholder meeting.

At seventy-five, wishes can become pleasantly specific.

A lovely year.

More time with someone you miss.

A trip you have been considering.

A slice with the frosting rose on it.

You blow out the candles.

Applause follows, which seems generous for an activity you have been practicing since early childhood. You accept it anyway.

Then comes the cutting.

There is always a person who says, “Just a tiny piece.”

You cut a tiny piece.

“Oh, you can make it a little bigger than that.”

You enlarge it.

“Not quite that big.”