

EIGHTH BIRTHDAY: (BIGOTRY)

BY MATT MIEHE

I didn't look much like a girl when I was younger. I blossomed out, but from three until I was fifteen, I was in that awkward phase like a half-shapen clay bust; my details still working their way out. Blocky face. Rigid torso. Short hair. I'm being a bit harsh on myself, but it was true. I used to be ambiguous, and my parents made me more ambiguous by breaking the stereotypes: pastel boiler suits or overalls—*good on them! It didn't work out in the end.*

My features eventually found their true home when I turned seventeen. Softer face, smaller build, shoulders less broad. *Other things like that.* But I still overcompensate and overdress and over do with eyeliner and mascara and lip gloss and tight clothes and corsets and high heels and girly colors and womanly brands and hefty purses and long hair and hair dye and tampons and pads and razors and expensive toiletries and pills and all that all over again and again.

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It was my birthday and we were out at a restaurant. It was just me and my parents, I was the only child and they wanted a 'personal' birthday: no friends. This was in the midst of my body being unsure of what to do with itself. I just turned eight. While I would usually go about wearing boiler suits or overalls, tonight they had me wear a dress. Which was alright. I didn't care about clothes at this time. And while I liked it, they would constantly ask if I preferred it over my other clothes; to which I would always say *I don't know...* I don't think they knew what was going on with me either, which is fine.

Dessert came. And even now, I look fondly at ice cream cakes with sparklers and my name written out in bold dark chocolate lines: MARISSA. *The best thing about being older is that any day can be your birthday.*

I blew out the sparklers, smiles crossed my mom's smoothed freckled face and my dad's stubbly white-black beard. I couldn't get a bite yet. My mom wanted me to wash my hands.

Another thing about being older is that you don't need to wash your hands before you eat.

We made our way to the woman's room, which was tucked away by the entrance in a dead-end hallway. We were about to enter when a big burly guy came out of the men's room. He gave me and my mom a faint quick smile like anyone else who sees us, but he did a double-take and kept his eyes on me. He turned cherry red and his eyes sullen.

He said something like, "What did you do to your son!?"

Which I found funny. Because I'm a girl. I thought he was being weird, silly, trying to banter with my mom like most random strangers—or hawks—being funny. She made a face at him, as if she wasn't in on the joke. But as soon as she took a breath, he jabbed my mom across the face and knocked her down. He was quick to grab me by my arms. He pulled me toward the exit, big strong hairy arms crushing my wrist like a can, just like what my dad would do to impress me. He was also quick to be knocked down by another man who did way worse

things to him than he did to my mom. I can't visualize it. ...*Eh*.

The managers cleared our bill. But I didn't know that, I didn't need to know that. All I did need to know at the time was that the power-lines outside the car window looked nice, so I stared out at those power-lines, catching glimpses of red lights and angry figurines in cars, looking away from the ice pack cushioning my mother's red-bruised-magma face. My dad was right, they did look nice.

We brought the ice cream cake home with us. It still had my name on it, but the chocolate line-work of 'MARISSA' had melded and melted and fallen and sunken and sagged and depressed and yearned for freedom from the melting, slurring cake base. It rotted in the back of the freezer.

When my parents' found it again a year later, they threw it out. But something must have happened while I was at school, because when I came back they gifted me all boys clothes. Which is fair; no one pays attention to boys. Boys get to shoot the shit and boys get to play games and boys get

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to toy and boys get their way and boys never get in-trouble
and boys get to do what they want and boys can be immature
and boys don't bleed between their legs and boys don't suffer
consequences and boys are not watched by hawks and boys....