



## The Brink by Olivia Wildenstein ('01)

“Blow out the candles, Mommy,” Tristan, my five-year old son, tells me as I count them again.

*Thirty.*

The moment my breath will touch the wavering wicks, I will be past my prime. I feel like a carton of milk with an expiration date. I still have a few good years ahead, but they will all be downhill. My chest will sag, the wrinkles I spotted this morning will deepen and scar my smooth skin, and my cheeks will grow hollow as the fat in my face moves south to my thighs.

I shake my head. I can't blow them out. *No, I refuse to leave my twenties.*

“There'll be more wax than icing soon,” Danny, my husband, says.

He stands behind me, still handsome even though his raven-black hair is peppered with silver and laugh lines frame his glittering brown eyes. He massages my shoulders to get me to relax. He loves me and I'm pretty certain he will always love me, even as my body deteriorates. He talks of growing old together. I don't want to grow old, but I want to be together.

I bite down on my lower lip. I've pushed two kids out of my womb, I've suffered through my parents' divorce, I've passed my bar exam, I've buried my mother, and yet extinguishing the wicks that wobble orange and gold seems more difficult than all of that.

“Maya do it. Pease, Mom. Pease?” my two-year old daughter asks.

“Maya's too small. I'll do it,” Tristan says, nudging his sister out of the way. They're both perched on my lap.

Before a fight ensues, Danny swoops down and grabs Maya who fights to regain her privileged seat in front of my bonfire cake.

“No, Mommy will make a wish and then she'll blow them out,” Danny says.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I'm being ridiculous. Your thirties are supposed to be peak years so they can't be all that bad, and yet I wish I could turn back time. I open my eyes and let out a deep breath. The flames flicker and fade and the room goes dark.

“Happy birthday to you, Mommy, happy birthday to you, Mommy,” my children chant as they climb on top of my bed brandishing abstract drawings.

How and when did I get into bed? And why are they giving me drawings I've already seen? And then my children leave and I'm kissing Danny and I wonder where they've gone but Danny's sliding under the sheets and I forget about Tristan and Maya

and concentrate on the pleasure building up inside of me. I happily fall asleep thinking that if this is thirty, I'm happy being thirty.

My days are not monotonous per se, but they're patterned. Wake up, get the kids ready for school, get them to school and daycare (preferably on time, but that's rarely the case), get home, clean the house, make lunch, eat lunch, go pick up Maya, go get Tristan, play in the park, go home, baths for everyone, dinner for everyone, sleep for everyone. Some days, I get some shopping done; some days, I get some reading in or I catch a movie; and some days, I go out to the restaurant with Danny and pretend we can go home anytime we want because we're just teenagers. The litany of events is the reason it took me so long to grasp what had happened.

I bring Tristan to his classroom, but it's empty. I spot the janitor and ask him why. He tells me today is August 30<sup>th</sup>, school starts tomorrow. It's summer break, he says. *Summer...* Isn't it nearly October 1<sup>st</sup>? My birthday is mid-September. I panic and stick the kids in their car seats and forget to strap them in.

I call Danny and ask him what day it is and he corroborates the janitor's story. They must be pulling my leg, but they don't know each other. Danny never drops the children off; he has to be at work too early. I go home and let the kids play in the living room while I go through my mailbox and locate the newspaper. August 30<sup>th</sup> is printed underneath the heading. I flip to the first article, nearly tearing the page out, and realize that I've already read it. I open the paper to another article. Also familiar.

The blood drains out of my face, but then I realize how ridiculous my theory is. If time were reversing we'd start with nights and end with mornings. A squabble over who gets to hold Spiderman erupts and I hurtle over tipped-over toys to break up Maya and Tristan's fight before it can begin.

Danny doesn't come home that night. He's always away on Mondays for work. I go to bed feeling very anxious, but also feeling hopeful that tomorrow will be September again and this is just a silly dream.

Danny's in bed with me in the morning, doing divine things to my body.

"Danny?" I topple him over.

"Yes?"

"Why aren't you at work?"

He gives me a crooked smile. "Because it's Sunday," he says. "Now will you please lay back and—"

I shriek, and in seconds, Danny's holding me and asking me what's wrong.

"What's wrong?" I yell. "What's wrong is that it's Sunday! It's not supposed to be Sunday. It's supposed to be Tuesday."

One of Danny's eyebrows cocks up. He doesn't understand. How could he? I managed to make time spin backward because I didn't want to age. I decide not to share what I fear. I tell him my crazy hormones triggered my panic, when in fact, *I'm* the crazy one, not my hormones!

Every second of my days are now spent in panicked horror, watching my children lose skills. Maya can't string words together anymore; Tristan scribbles out of the lines in his coloring book. I sit in my bathtub, because it's the quietest place in the house, and I cry... every day.

My loved ones go about their lives, oblivious that they're regressing; I'm the only person who sees it happen. My husband's skin is more tanned this morning. We've just

come home from our spring break in Mexico. No... that's false. We're leaving tomorrow but he thinks we just got home. I try to enjoy returning to Mexico but Tristan gets bitten by a snake in Mexico. The first time around, I thought he was poisoned and would die. This time, I know he will make it but I also know he will feel the snake's teeth sink into his tender skin because I can't change what happens. I don't want my child to experience pain, but it happens anyway. I'm stronger this time, but come nightfall, I disintegrate into a mess of tears.

A year goes by like this. My husband's hair loses the new silver strands. Maya is now one and Tristan is starting first grade. One morning, Maya can't walk anymore and I freak out.

"She'll walk soon, honey. Don't worry," Danny says. He tucks me against him and I try to hold back the tears but they cascade down my cheeks, along with my titanic guilt.

Another year slides back. I wake Tristan up and then I go to Maya's room and she's not in bed and I scream and Danny arrives, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"Where's Maya? She's not here? Where is she?"

"So we're calling her Maya, are we?" he asks, brown eyes glittering. He approaches me and strokes my belly.

I look down. I'm pregnant. I scramble back to our bed and throw myself on it and sob because I will never see Maya again. She'll just get smaller and smaller and stop existing. Danny takes Tristan out in the stroller to let Mommy rest.

I want to tell my husband the truth now, but he'll be angry with me, or worse, he'll divorce me, take Tristan away, have me interned in a psych ward, and we won't grow old together.

Today is the saddest day of my life.

Time flies backward and I spend every waking second clutching Tristan because he too will slip away. *Three, two, one...* I'm holding him in the delivery room, and he's wailing, still gooey and warm from my womb. And I press him to my chest and I cry tears of sorrow. Danny thinks I'm happy.

I'm miserable.

I'm twenty-five. I cry through my entire pregnancy and plead with God for time to start up again, but it doesn't and Tristan wilts away along with my hope.

Something extraordinary happens next. I see my mother again. She's smiling and stroking my arm. I hug her and bury my face in her neck that smells like black tea and roses. She has to pry my arms away from her. She laughs and asks what's going on with me. I tell her that this is the first day I've felt happy in a long time.

Her jewel-toned eyes narrow. "I thought you beat your depression. Didn't you stop your meds?" she asks me. And she's holding me at arm's length when all I desire is to be crushed against her.

The next thing I know, I pop a little blue pill inside my mouth. It's supposed to be my last but it's backwards so it's my first. I feel better, even though everything inside of me feels broken as if a grenade exploded in my stomach.

I'm sitting in front of my bar exam and I'm relaxed because it doesn't matter. I'll never practice law since I get pregnant instead. And that's okay now. My children

brought me so much more than the high-powered career I'd aspired to. A tear plops down on the ink and blurs my answer, which is fading off the paper.

I get married and it's a fantastic break to the bleakness of my life. I enjoy that day but it will end. The week that follows is magical. Danny and I never had time for a honeymoon, but the week leading to the wedding, which had me stressed out of my mind the first time around, feels like a honeymoon. Each morning, I wake up excited. But then I remember Tristan and Maya, and what remains of my heart begins to chip away. Soon, I won't have a heart just like I won't have my children.

A spray of sunshine warms the iciness building inside of me. Today is the day Danny asks me to marry him with his grandmother's ruby ring. I know it's inside the chocolate mousse. Each bite makes my throat constrict because after I find it, I will never get to wear it.

We leave on our first trip together. *No...* we come back from it. It's terribly romantic in spite of the shabby hotel room, which was the only thing we could afford at the time. I relive our first time naked, discovering each other's bodies. I love every single inch of him. It's the first time I say *I love you* and it's also the last. Tears drip off my lashes and he kisses them away and he tells me I'm the most beautiful woman alive and I don't give a crap about beauty because in two weeks, he won't know who I am.

When our first and last kiss happens, I pray harder than I've ever prayed for this nightmare to end.

"I want to grow old with you," I whisper in Danny's ear and he deepens the kiss.

I don't sleep that night, and yet Danny still dissolves off the bed like a mirage. Even the musky scent of his skin disperses and I am abandoned in a barren desert of wrinkled sheets.

I spend days in bed. The days turn into weeks that turn into months. I don't enjoy my dorm room parties. I don't take any pleasure in my first kiss, which happens during prom, because the only man I want to kiss is Danny, and by kissing this other boy, I'm cheating on the love of my life.

My parents are together again, and they're happy. I'm not. I will never be happy. I read books I've already read and learn of news that is not new; I eat dishes I've already tasted and meet people who I already know. I'm so young now, my cheeks are round and I have no chest. I don't even have my period yet.

I'm just a daughter, now. I'm not a lawyer, I'm not a wife, I'm not a mother. I threw it all away because I was scared of aging. Now, the only thing I dread is living. As I sit in front of a birthday cake where only twelve candles are left, it dawns on me that I have twelve years left to live. I know when I'm going to leave this world. It's horrible. I'm supposed to be a girl on the brink of adulthood, but I'm a girl on the brink of childhood.

I hear Dad ask my mother what's wrong with me.

"I don't want to get younger," I say.

Silence.

"I don't. I don't!" I rage.

"Good. Because you can't."

I snap my eyes up from the cake and see my husband. His head is resting on the pillow next to mine. He's stroking my cheek. I blink over and over and expect him to fade but he doesn't.

“Bad dream?” he asks.

I jump on top of him and cover his face with kisses. And then I just hold him and fill my lungs with the scent of him and I fill my heart with the sound of his. He’s laughing because he doesn’t understand the loss I experienced. I think of Tristan and Maya and spring out of bed and rush to their bedrooms. I wake both up and they groan. Tristan falls back asleep. Maya is delighted to have been roused early. I bring her back to my bedroom and count the seconds until Tristan trots in and requests his cartoons and his bottle of milk.

Once he arrives, I’m truly happy. I don’t know what will happen in the next minute, in the next hour, in the next day, and that’s all right. I don’t want to know, because ignorance is bliss.