

Switched at Birthday



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Prologue

A Little Bit of Birthday Magic

Once there was a boy who lived in Kalamazoo, Michigan. His father was a baker and his mother was a candle-maker. They owned the Cake and Candle Company of Kalamazoo.

The cakes and candles that the boy's family made were perfectly ordinary in every way but one: When, on your birthday, you lit a Kalamazoo candle on a Kalamazoo cake and made a wish, a tiny spark of magic was ignited. And, if the stars were properly aligned, your birthday wish came true. But the magic only worked until you turned eighteen. After that, you had to make your birthday wishes come true on your own.

On his first birthday the boy wished for the ability to speak. After blowing out his candle, he said his first word: "Birfday."

On his fifth birthday the boy wished for a guitar, and when he opened his presents, there it was — the most beautiful boy-sized guitar he'd ever seen.

On his tenth birthday the boy wished he could sing a

solo with his school choir. His wish was granted the very next day, when the choir director chose him to sing “Jingle Bell Rock” in the Christmas pageant.

On his fifteenth birthday the boy wished to get a part in the school musical, *Camelot*. A week later he was cast as King Arthur.

And so it went, until his eighteenth birthday. That morning his mother said, “Remember, this is the last year that the birthday magic will work. Wish very carefully.”

All day long the boy thought about what to wish for. That night, when his cake and candle were presented to him, he made a magic wish for the last time.

He wished for the ability to make magic for other people.

As always, his wish came true.

The next day, he got a letter from the Peabody Institute, a famous music school in Baltimore, Maryland, offering him a scholarship. So the boy from Kalamazoo got on a bus to Baltimore. For four years he studied music and drama at the Institute. He learned all about the magic of the theater. When he graduated he became a theater arts teacher.

And he never forgot how useful a little bit of birthday magic could be.

Lavender Blue

I didn't expect much of anything to happen on my thirteenth birthday. So I had been born. So what? Why should it be different from any other Monday?

The first twelve years, eleven months, and thirty days of my life had taught me not to get my hopes up.

When I got to school Maybelle Dawson galloped up and gave me a package wrapped in pale purple — otherwise known as *lavender* — paper. Maybelle Dawson was my best friend. Okay, my only friend.

"Happy birthday, Schmitzy!" she said.

My full name is Lavender Myrtle Schmitz. That's right: Lavender. Myrtle. Schmitz. Maybelle knew I hated *Lav* (slang for *bathroom* in the U.K., which meant I could never, ever set foot in England), so Maybelle called me Schmitzy. It made my mother weep.

Maybelle was very pretty, with curly hair and bright blue eyes and round rosy cheeks. But she had big hands and long flat feet and she *gallumphed* when she walked, and I guess that was enough to exile her to Loserville. My situation was more obvious: short hairy cavegirl + glasses = loser.

I was used to it.

“Open your present,” Maybelle said. I ripped off the tissue paper. Inside was a framed picture of me playing my ukulele at the Falls Road Middle School Talent Extravaganza. Maybelle had made the frame herself, decorating it with tiny cardboard ukes and sprigs of lavender.

“Thank you, Maybelle,” I said. “Thank you for memorializing one of the worst moments of my life. This way I’ll never be tempted to perform in public again.”

Her face clouded, and I immediately felt sorry. Words just blurped out of my mouth.

“I thought you were great that night,” Maybelle said. “You should have won first prize.”

At the Talent Extravaganza, against my better judgment, I’d gotten up in front of the entire school and sang the Hawaiian pop song “Tiny Bubbles,” accompanying myself on the uke. I’d practiced for months, and by the day of the show I thought I sounded pretty decent. I waited backstage for my turn, watching the other acts. Most of the girls sang Taylor Swift songs or danced to hip-hop music. One boy did a magic act that no one seemed to like.

The more I watched, the more nervous I got. “Tiny Bubbles” was a terrible song choice. None of my classmates would know it. I should have picked something more popular — or at least something from this century.

My hands got sweaty and shaky. My face felt hot. When Mr. Brummel, our music teacher and the MC for the evening, called out my name, I barely recognized it.

If my feet hadn’t felt nailed to the floor, I would have run

home in a panic. Instead I found myself standing on the stage, alone in the spotlight, clutching my uke. I started to play “Tiny Bubbles.” My voice was quavery. My fingering was unsure. I sounded nothing like I had in my bedroom.

I botched it.

And I was booed off the stage.

“I think this is a great picture of you,” Maybelle said to me now.

It wasn’t. There was no such thing as a great picture of me. “You meant well,” I said.

John Obrycki walked up and looked at the picture. I put it away.

“Is today your birthday?” he asked. “If I’d known, I would have gotten you something.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” I said. We weren’t friends, exactly. Though I supposed he was one of the less repulsive people at our school.

“Here,” John said. “How’s this?” He ripped a page out of his notebook and folded the paper into an origami star.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s really cool that you can make generic presents for people in about two seconds, without having to think about it or anything.”

John’s cheek twitched slightly.

“Schmitzy!” Maybelle elbowed me to let me know I was being rude. I didn’t know why I’d said such a rude thing to John. Because I actually thought the star was pretty.

“Thank you,” I said to John, putting the star with my hideous picture.

A loud burst of laughter came from across the hall. Scarlet Martinez glanced over the crowd at me, then looked away.

The problem with Falls Road Middle School was that it was “middle” in more ways than one. It was the middle between elementary school and high school, obviously. But it also sat right on the border of two very different neighborhoods: Hampden and Roland Park. Hampden was row houses and thrift stores and hipsters and ladies in curlers who called everyone “hon.” Roland Park was big houses and big trees and preppies with fancy cars. I lived in Hampden, of course. Scarlet Martinez and her friends mostly lived in Roland Park.

Scarlet had long, wavy hair and long, long legs and big hazel eyes. She was skinny, but not too skinny. Whatever she wore was always the perfect thing to wear. She was good at soccer. She seemed to be good at everything. I wished just once she’d do something awkward and make a fool of herself. But she never did. She was surrounded by a crowd of the most popular kids, the Glossy Posse and their boy followers.

The floor at Scarlet’s feet was littered with wrapping paper. Someone had brought a box of cupcakes and Scarlet’s friends helped themselves.

“Is today her birthday too?” John asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “Impossible as it may seem, Scarlet and I were born on the very same day.”

Scarlet got a key chain, a purse, a sparkly hair clip, some makeup, and lots of jewelry — not that I was looking or cared. Kelsey Tan, Scarlet’s second-best friend — she had so many best friends she had to rank them First, Second, Third, and so

on — gave her a pink T-shirt with the word *STAR* on the front. Scarlet's first-best friend, Zoe Carter, presented her own gift with a flourish.

Scarlet opened it and pulled out an iPod. At first she looked confused. She probably already had an iPod.

"I've been looking all over for this," she said. "Isn't this my iPod?"

"I stole it from you yesterday," Zoe said. "I filled it up with five hundred of my favorite songs and put it in this cute alligator case for you. Do you love it?"

"Thanks, Zo." Scarlet threw her arms around Zoe and they jumped up and down, screaming. They did that a lot.

Out of all that junk, the only decent present she got, I thought, was from Charlie Scott. He gave her a bouquet of blue flowers. Scarlet sniffed them. I could see by her face that they smelled really good.

Mr. Brummel passed through the hall just then, kicking through the tumbleweeds of crumpled wrapping paper on the floor. "Well, well — looks like we've got a birthday here?" he said.

"Two birthdays," Maybelle chimed in, nodding at me.

"Want a cupcake, Mr. B.?" Scarlet held out the white bakery box to him.

"No thanks." Mr. Brummel patted his stomach. "Watching my figure. Happy birthday, girls."

Scarlet unwrapped yet another tube of lip gloss and accidentally dropped it on the floor. The tube rolled across the hall, bumping my foot. I picked it up.

"I'll get it," Zoe said. She crossed the hall and held out her hand.

"Today is Schmitzy's birthday too," Maybelle told her.

"Like I care," Zoe said. "Hand it over."

I gave her the lip gloss. As if I wanted the stupid thing.

Zoe ran back across the hall. "You might want to take this back to the store," she said, handing the gloss to Scarlet. "It's all gross now. It's been in the *Lav*."

They laughed. Scarlet dropped the gloss into her bag.

I wasn't trying to catch her eye — I went out of my way to avoid that kind of attention — but I did, by mistake. She had a strange expression on her face — not sad, exactly, but confused, like something was wrong. But what could possibly go wrong for the prettiest, most popular girl in the school? Especially on her birthday, which looked pretty great from where I was standing.

She looked away quickly and went back to laughing with her friends. I figured I'd imagined the whole thing. Something made me glance down the hall to see if Mr. Brummel had witnessed my latest humiliation. He was just disappearing around the corner. So he probably hadn't.

There was a time when a mean comment like Zoe's would have crushed me. I used to get crushed on a daily basis. I'd been called Yeti, Hairball, Furby. . . . The worst was when someone started a rumor that I was so hairy I needed to go to a dog groomer. That one really got to me for some reason.

But by the time I turned thirteen I was tough. No one could hurt me. I'd heard every insult anyone could sling at me. Or at least I thought I had.

The bell rang for first period. Scarlet hugged her thousands of friends. They all sang “Happy Birthday” to her as they walked to class.

“That’s what a birthday is supposed to be like,” I said.

“Don’t worry, Schmitzy,” Maybelle said. “It’s only nine o’clock in the morning. There’s lots of time left for birthday surprises.”

“Oh, I know,” I said, feeling lower than ever.



Maybelle was right — there were plenty of birthday surprises left to come that day.

In the cafeteria, Zoe “accidentally” splattered my shirt with beefaroni when I was in line behind her.

“I’m so sorry, Lav,” Zoe said. “But don’t worry — you can’t even see the stain. Your shirt’s already dirty.”

Next, Ms. Kantner caught me slipping a note to Maybelle in English. As punishment, she read it to the class out loud.

M – Do you think I need to start using deodorant? Sometimes after gym I feel like I have B.O. Do I stink right now? – L.

That got a big response from the whole class.

The only good part of the day came right after school. Mr. Brummel held a meeting for everyone auditioning for the fall musical, *The Music Man*.

It was my dream to play Marian the Librarian in *The Music*

Man. I'd decided to audition even though I knew I'd never get the part — after the “Tiny Bubbles” disaster, I was sure nobody wanted to be on a stage with me anytime soon. But I couldn't resist a chance to sing “Goodnight, My Someone” in public just once, even if it was only for an audition.

The auditorium was packed with girls who wanted to be Marian. I knew I had a snowball's chance in Miami, but I had to try.

“I didn't expect such a big crowd,” Mr. Brummel told us. “I think we'll have to divide the auditions into two afternoons. Everyone with a last name starting with *A* through *L* will audition tomorrow, and *M* through *Z* will go the next day.”

Good, I thought. That gave me an extra day to practice.

“The theater is full of traditions and superstitions,” Mr. Brummel went on. “And magic. An actor can transform into a whole new person right in front of your eyes. You've probably heard that it's good luck to say ‘break a leg’ before a performance. Well, back in my school days in Kalamazoo we had a different good luck rhyme we chanted before auditions.”

Then he told us the rhyme:

*Know the role you want to play
And say the name three times this way:
backward, forward,
upward, downward,
inward, outward,
eastward, westward,*

*northward, southward,
most of all, heavenward.*

A few people snickered. Mr. Brummel got a little carried away with the “theater magic” sometimes.

But I needed a good luck charm. I vowed to try out Mr. Brummel’s superstitious rhyme right before my audition.

And I did, sort of.

That’s when everything went kablooey.