

Cake

by Ben Jardine

Louise Fitzgerald was turning nine. Her birthday, today on this most ultimate of Saturdays, was an occasion she had been looking forward to for months; she had spent weeks planning her gifts to a level of precision unheard of in nine-year old girls around her. Her mother, a forty-something, took pride in her first and only offspring after having so many failed relationships with random men—years of looking for love in desperate places: the packs of cigarettes and glasses of chardonnay, the beards on motorbikes, and her own worried parents had pushed her, finally, to marry an accounts lawyer from Tulsa; a stable man he was, both in terms of chosen method of transportation (four wheels) and employment/mental/financial prowess; a man who truly did love her, despite her still remaining hankering for a cigarette, of which she would smoke two of in the evenings outside of their first floor bathroom window (while Louise slept soundly upstairs), or the daily glass (or two) of chardonnay. Louise was her mother embodied (excluding the drinking and occasional cigarette, of course), complete with the same sparkling blue eyes and wavy brown hair, and therefore her mother took great lengths to ensure her child's own happiness and, perhaps out of some repressed fear of her own parents neglecting her, never let her not get what she wanted.

So on this day, Louise's ninth year on the earth, her mother had planned a birthday bash unlike any *she* could have ever imagined when she was her own daughter's age—growing up in the rural lands of Kansas where those normal birthday outing locations (the putt-putt golf course or the amusement park or for God's sake even just one cinema) just didn't exist. Maybe out of these really just psychologically twisted and awfully selfish thoughts emerge Louise's mother's

true colors. Louise's mother could have taken her daughter anywhere: she had mentioned to Louise that there was a new strip mall that opened the other month down on Lincoln, but that was a mere decoy. Today Louise Fitzgerald was turning nine, and so her mother decided to take her to every child's idea of a great haven, that is, Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play.

Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play was one of those seedy pizzerias (which in no way encompass the idea of the Italian tradition in any sense of the word) turned arcade where kids can go and play on enticingly tasteless machines and get tickets spewed out in bulk and cash those tickets in for prizes whose monetary value comes nowhere close to the amount of money spent on tokens in order to get those tickets or time spent looking at flashing lights in a pre-pubescent state of what some might very well gather as, well, gambling.

But what made Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play so spectacularly unique was the appearance of Dr. Rabbit himself: a monstrous rabbit (or to ruin the illusion, an old and worn out rabbit costume inside which a thirty-something year-old man with a shaggy beard and the looming deadline of this month's rent payment to a landlady he has deep and carnal feelings for, but *knows*, partly because of how he spends his working days and partly because of some innate happenstance to wreck any and all relationships he attempts with women, that he will never be anything more than a tenant to). A rabbit with a thick cotton ball tail tinged with dirt and grime and something chocolate, and two large glazed eyes entombed in the thick and heavy removable and slightly loose bunny head, which rested heavily on the doctor. No parent has ever asked what the highest level of education Dr. Rabbit has ever received was, or how/what/why he practices whatever it is he is qualified in, because his face happened to be splattered on every piece of merchandise in the arcade; forced down throats as a legitimate being in crudely designed and manufactured t-shirts, sweatpants, ping pong balls, card decks, shot glasses—all were donned with the goofy, stethoscoped, two-toothed face of Dr. Rabbit.

On the night before Louise's ninth birthday party, Dr. Rabbit had been refused (once again) the pleasure of a nice seafood dinner at the Long John Silver's in town with the landlady whom he very much desired in a transfixedly carnal way and had therefore decided to walk to the corner shop in a state of mindless rejection and buy a bottle of Hardy's Rye Whiskey, which he chose to drink half of on the way back to his small one-bedroom apartment in an effort to pass away the sadness and perhaps fall asleep a little bit quicker that night, but as he watched an nth episode of M*A*S*H, that half bottle had turned slowly run dry, and now Dr. Rabbit found himself waking up on the secondhand sofa in his living room late for work, with Alan Alda staring down into his hungover eyes following twelve hours of uninterrupted and drunkenly numb hibernation. At the time of his rise, Dr. Rabbit was not in possession of the knowledge that nine years to the day, Louise Fitzgerald had emerged from her overbearing mother's womb. He was late, he knew, as he scurried off the Craigslist pullout couch, with spittle caught in his thickly bearded chin and his dog, which he had adopted some six months earlier in an effort to replace the love that the landlady could but would not bring, pawing at his face. He quickly dressed, throwing on a generically grey combination of sweater, sweatpants and white trainers, grabbed the skin and life and entity of Dr. Rabbit and took off in the tiny, two-door coupe he had had since high school.

As Dr. Rabbit sped through the streets of town on his way to Fun and Play, Louise lay in bed, awake. She hadn't slept a wink that night, but no trace of fatigue plagued her as she awaited the sounds of her mother signaling that her presents were wrapped (and were ready to be speedily unwrapped) somewhere downstairs. She had no idea what her mother had planned for her today; no traces of hidden gifts or trips out with no reason had been discovered, and Louise knew that a surprise was in store for her.

She descended the wooden staircase cautiously down to the living room, clutching the bannister and Teddy under her arm. She could barely make out the top of her mother's head disappearing around the corner and into the kitchen. Louise quickly began taking the stairs two at a time in anticipation of being in the thick of the birthday atmosphere—barreling down them in a cloud of childish elation—until she got to the last half-dozen or so, where she pushed off on the balls of her feet and flew through the air to land in a snowboarder's stance at the foot of the staircase. Teddy soars out of her arms as she loses control of all grip—the hands quiver as Louise trots into the dimly lit living room.

That Fitzgerald living room, with its magenta shag carpet and wood-paneled walls was an intentional indicator of the character of the rest of the house. Some frequent visitors of the home often remarked about how the pattern of the curtains in the second spare bedroom looked identical to a similar pattern on one of Mr. Fitzgerald's winter sweaters. Mr. Fitzgerald, a man with a keen eye for fashion, had found a good deal on a type of allergy and dust-free carpet from a friend he had had in law school who now sells incredibly researched and reliable household products (ultra-lightweight but incredibly efficient garden tools, bladeless blenders, allergy free carpets, that kind of thing) in Connecticut now, and decided to get not just the living room fitted but also the dining room, the master bedroom, and Louise's room. *20K for just these rooms*, he had said, the friend, *you got it friend-o*. The two men then shook hands somewhat awkwardly after so many years of separation, and mentioned going out to get a drink one of these evenings sometime or something.

Wood paneling, too, could be found on every wall of the house, even in the wardrobes and the broom closet downstairs. This had been bought with the house, though it has been through several layers of paint and varnish and paint. Two summers after Louise had been born, her mother, heavily convinced by a magazine article she had read which said that too much light

in one room could damage a newborn's eyesight, had removed the permanent light fixtures in the ceiling. She then, to Mr. Fitzgerald's chagrin, went to a yard sale down the street and bought a set of large (taller than Mr. Fitzgerald) ornate lamps with thin tapestry heads and gilded ivy designs running vertically up the shaft. Two of these stood in the living room, one in the master bedroom, and one in the garage (it had broken a bulb two days after its purchase and now lay in the corner, forgotten to be tended to).

As Louise approached the small pyramid of meticulously wrapped presents in the corner by one of the lamps, she could faintly catch the glimmer and shadows the light made on the red and shiny paper. She counted, *one, two, three, four*. Four presents. Louise realized then that four presents was the perfect number: everything she had asked for (she hoped) was there (she hoped) and (her mother surely hoped) would bring her great joy.

The soft voice of Louise's tirelessly hard-working mother on the phone floated into the living room as Louise—not really visibly older, but mentally convinced of her own growth in wisdom and intelligence—plopped herself on the ground at the foot of one of the towering lamps, eager to start ripping and tearing away at the thin layers of paper. When her mother finally emerged, Louise already had fingers on wrapped box, ready to go.

Louise's ninth birthday list goes as follows:

- 1) A model of My Little Mermaid. Limited edition, this season's hot commodity, pressed in a flamboyant pose behind inflexible plastic. Louise's mother had waited in line at the mall for close to an hour to get the present, sacrificing her 3 p.m. Yoga and Assorted Zen Practices class at the health club. The doll, with her blue skin and golden hair, was the pinnacle of Louise's birthday haul, and meant the world to her mother that she "open that one present at the last, darling".

- 2) A sweater. Fleece, warm and thick, purple. Also purchased at the mall, but at much more of a price than the My Little Mermaiden had ever achieved, and with much less of a line. It was bought for Louise ahead of this year's winter months, which predicted by nearly every meteorologist on cable news as being "the coldest winter since the Great Ohio Freeze-Over", and Louise's mother wanted her daughter to not catch cold like she did last year.
- 3) Make Your *Own* Pizza! pizza oven and play set. "*We Put the Fun in Functional Miniature Ovens!*"
- 4) A new laptop computer, with sleekly grey keys and a bright screen Louise could fit six of her own hands on.

And now Louise's mother watches as her baby daughter, nine years and nine months since conception, rips open her presents with an eye of mixed greed and desire and sheer spoiled white, socio-economically upper-class disregard of one's own place in the world, attitude. Basically, the Fitzgeralds are pretty fucked up people. But let's move right along:

Dr. Rabbit races through a red light with little to no regard for anyone around him: flying through intersections like some teenage hooligan. He looks down at his feet, one pressed into the gas pedal and the other resting gently against the car door, and notices the unmatched socks on both feet and the untied shoelaces and the just generally dirty and worn out state of the shoes and shoelaces themselves. And now Dr. Rabbit is in a state, thinking, perhaps too much, about his lack of fashion and overall sense of beauty, and maybe that's the reason why the landlady

continues to deny the (free) Long John Silver's seafood meal and his deeply carnal and passionate feelings toward her. Perhaps that, he thought, was the reason. Or maybe it was the lack of proper prospects or a garage or health insurance. Dr. Rabbit never asked for this life—he found himself here one day, waking up from some intricate dream to find a seven day a week job with minimum reward and maximum sweat—he just simply happened to be living it.

He glanced to his right at the passenger seat where he wished the landlady were sitting with hair flowing in the breeze of a lowered car window—but instead only found a twelve-pack of Tecate and an oversized rabbit head with buck teeth and stethoscope receptors in each ear. One hand on the wheel, he reaches for a beer—that deliciously warm and foamy solution of mind numbing—eyes placed expertly after years of multitasking behind a wheel on the road. Top of the can popped, opening sips of foam taken and enjoyed with momentarily closed eyes, and can placed in between thick tree trunk legs in sweatpants; eyes back on road, peripheries consulted for white and black with and blue and red sirens, and the morning rush continues.

Pulling up to the beige and boxed building with his oversized face on it, Dr. Rabbit parks and shuffles through empty beer cans in the foot space of his high school keepsake, pushing the door open with immeasurably inebriated force. He heaves himself out, looks around for onlookers or bystanders, and grabs his suit and backpack with one hand before heading around through the backdoor of the boxed and beige building.

But and now Louise and her overbearing mother have left their home with a small group of Louise's closest and friendliest of friends, heading straight for Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play. Louise and her companions, unaware of their destination or Louise's mother's real and really just twisted intentions of revisiting some childhood fantasy by way of her daughter, sit in the back seat with Louise who is grinning and covered in a brand new purple sweater and looking just

completely overjoyed and chuffed to bits with a model mermaid perched on her bony knee, while her mother sits in the driver's seat with both hands, both eyes, both ears, both cerebral hemispheres tuned into the ebb and the flow of the traffic on the road and all of the cars around her. With the occasional flick of hair from her rotund haircut, Louise's mother makes eyes into the rearview mirror at her darling daughter and her darling presents and her darling friends. And with the upmost confidence that her daughter was happy and content there in the back seat of the nonspecifically modeled (probably an animal of some kind) SUV, she smiles. Now let's not take this observation lightly: Louise's mother hadn't smiled in twelve years. That time, so long ago, she and Mr. Fitzgerald had gone out to eat in town for one of those Friday nights: one of those date nights; a let's-schedule-this-one-day-a-week-outing-for-the-two-of-us-at-a-set-time-so-that-we-won't-really-have-a-reason-to-miss-it-and-maybe-cement-a-solid-long-term-relationship-once-again-and-save-ourselves kind of night. They had gone to an Italian-Swiss fusion restaurant, called something clever like Lasagna in Lausanne or some alliteration of the sort, where the waiters speak Italian to you if you know it, and just as perfect English if you don't, and serve you pricey wine with towels wrapped tightly around the bottles while a landscape of the Alps lies painted on the entirety of one wall. The Fitzgerald couple, Louise-less at the time, had sat at their table for hours (staying well after their 8 p.m. reservation), laughing and getting drunk on expensively bland red wine and talking about their loves and passions, and Mr. Fitzgerald had mentioned taking a sailing trip around the world with his wife, sitting there lovingly across the table and the two talked at length about the details of such a trip, and as they did, the excitement and sheer possibility of such a thing happening made the two Fitzgeraldses very happy indeed. And Louise's mother had smiled. Now the family's finances lay in a smoldering wreck, the sailing boat an inconceivable speck on the horizon at this point, with neither Mr. nor Mrs. Fitzgerald aboard it.

But and now our car of interesting characters pulls up to the boxed and beige building and one of Louise's friends makes the connection before Louise does that the party Louise's mother had planned wasn't at the new strip mall like she had said originally when leaving the house, but rather, it was here at Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play. Screeches immediately burst out in the back seats—screeches that would normally cause one to plug one's ears with index fingertips like a classic French mime, but instead made Louise's mother's heart flutter with joy. She embraced the raucousness and smiled again, showing garishly clean teeth this time, while she found a parking space and parked the car and got out and opened up the car door where the girls, still giggling with a few screeches here and there, shuffled and hopped down from the tall leathery seats of the SUV and onto the blacktop of the parking lot. Louise's mother runs her slender fingers through her daughter's hair and whispers, *Happy birthday, my darling*, and follows the gaggle of giggling, gleefully gay (the Thesaurus was open) and surely hopefully gratified girls into the plain glass doors and beige and boxed walls of the office complex suite of Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play.

A woman from the check-in desk wearing a headset like those drive thru window workers wear and clutching a clipboard and wearing green scrubs like one would wear in a doctor's office, greets them at the door. Louise's mother mentions "Fitzgerald, party of five" almost instantaneously upon entry and the group is swept into a private dining room attached to the wall of skeeball sets, where, as the group moves through the crowd of really just insane kids and their meanderingly bored-looking parents, a rather large boy has just won what seems like the mother load of tickets. They pour out of the machine like some never-ending tongue, and fall to the floor in a stack of yellow and red, and the whirring of the alarms and the flashing of red and green lights could indicate the lucky winner from anywhere in the building. Louise and her friends watched with what can only be described as envious astonishment as the boy proceeded to jump

up and down, body fat rolling in nearly every place as his feet took off and left from the ground, and Louise's mother watched on with what can only be described as sheer disgust.

They all sit at one long table underneath bright fluorescent lights, in a room with walls just a slightly different shade of beige than the outside of the building, and which walls are all adorned really quite well with underwater-themed decorations and bright turquoise letters that screamed, *Happy Birthday, Louise!*, hanging loosely like tired grins. Louise sits at the head of the table—the girl of the hour, in her sweater and with her mermaid on her lap—and her mother sits opposite her at the other end of the table, the other head of the table, so she could watch her child interact with all of her delightful friends, and whose friends arranged themselves in no order whatsoever but as near to Louise as they could.

They settle in and Louise's mother has a chance to have a quick word with the waitress, who has on a rabbit-grey colored uniform complete with a bushy cotton-ball of a tail and tall floppy ears, regarding a certain birthday surprise. The waitress goes out of the birthday room and passes the boy, who is still hopping up and down in his post-skee-ball victory dance and starting to collect the piles upon piles of tickets in his hands and shirt, and heads into the kitchen. The struggling chef there, a fourth generation Italian-American still somehow with a thick Italian accent, is in the process of churning out greasy pepperoni pizzas at an alarming rate. Exhausted words exchanged, and the chef gets a chance to wipe some of the sweat from his bushy eyebrows and then almost immediately gets back to work. Now, though, the waitress no longer has business in this roiling inferno of a hellhole and decides to head back out to the floor, where, along the way, she passes Dr. Rabbit who is on his way to take a quick smoke break outside the room through the misspelled "EMPLOYS ONLY" signed door.

The waitress and Dr. Rabbit exchange hasty, exclusively unique greetings in this exact setting—a nod of the oversized and bucktoothed head for Dr. Rabbit and a timid greeting and sly

smile from the bunny-tailed waitress—as they pass through the arcade (walled in by children and lights and alarms and bells), and Dr. Rabbit, with a thumping headache and sweat stinging his human eyes continues on through the two swinging doors at the back of the arcade next to the shooting range, a remarkable place where far too many teenagers with air rifles could be found knocking down cans and little model men. Dr. Rabbit takes no notice, instead choosing to remove his head almost immediately upon entry into the powerfully and fluorescently lit back room.

A row of lockers, green and dented in more places than one with stickers adorning, is arranged hugging one wall. Industrial pipes hang above head, one of which is dripping (almost brimming) into a small red bucket on the ground. A light brown liquid has formed a kind of congealed film over the tops of other small red buckets around. Dr. Rabbit squints in his drunken state at the bright lights above head. He puts his head on top of the row of lockers—knowing that it isn't quite big enough but from literally months of doing so knows it'll fit right there on top—and grabs a cigarette from inside his nearly empty locker. Door slams, hand reaches around Dr. Rabbit's back to unzip the top of his zipper and let some goddamn air in this pocket of heat and body odor. He perches the cigarette in between two chapped lips and walks outside into the industrial center car park.

Dr. Rabbit's Fun and Play is located in the North Haven Industrial Park in a lot almost identical to the ones on either side of it, and which houses businesses anywhere from insurance sales to Subway sandwiches, to a daycare for Christian children. Dr. Rabbit sits on the curb with a cigarette in hand outside of the side entrance to the building, still wearing the hot outer body. One foot tapping the warm black tarmac of the parking lot while he watches cars of children come and go with their parents, he drags on the cigarette and the sequential plumes of smoke surround Dr. Rabbit's now human face.

These breaks outside were what pushed him through—countless hours in a thick and furry suit take a toll, but these momentary breaks outside with a pack of Marlboros were the only real sources of respite for him. He pondered walking inside and tearing the place to pieces, professing to his employer his obviously bleak and crestfallen existence and burning that burdening costume in a fire produced by his employer's parked car, a freshly gasoline doused t-shirt, and a box of matches. He thought about this possibly happening, and about driving home and finding his landlady and grabbing her and driving her to the Long John Silver's and finally showing her what a great guy he could be to her. He thought and he thought, and he checked his tiny digital watch and noticed he had time for another fag and sat some more and smoked some more and thought a bit more and decided to go back inside and do something unreasonably reasonable.

The waitress, back in this fiery kitchen, was preparing to bring out the chef's surprise creation: a birthday cake made especially for Louise with a smaller scale model of her very own My Little Mermaid (complete with those bright blue locks of hair like rivers of crisp water) resting on an oversized shell. The cake, a ghastly looking red thing, was seven pounds of chocolate and food coloring and birthday wishes. The waitress needed a cart to wheel it out.

Four wheels in front, the waitress rolls out of the kitchen with the cake ready for Louise to spit on in the joy and excitement of her very own birthday wish. No word on the whereabouts of Dr. Rabbit himself as of yet—he usually is required for all birthday performances, of which there are an average of four a day.

The singing soon begins, that globally recognized tune, spurted out by the waitress at first and then by all of the surrounding strangers who take notice of the cake and the waitress and who

care enough to sing the song, but are so unaware that this cake is going into the private rooms. Some people are clapping along, while others are just refusing to participate in general.

Dr. Rabbit has by this point thrown his third cigarette, unfinished, to the ground and has stomped it out underneath an oversized paw-like foot. He wipes his forehead hastily, stares at his employer's car, and goes back in through the rear door.

A singular candle sits in the center of the cake, tall and slender and lit with a bright and flickering flame. A drop of wax runs down it steadily, ready to become one with the red icing that is pasted on the surface of the cake. The shift manager at the arcade, waiting inside the private dining room, stands with one hand on the back of Louise's chair—Louise, who has just eyed the lone candle and its lone flame, is now beginning to jump up and down in her seat—and her mother reaches for the camera, which has been resting on the table after some frequent use, and prepares to snap some photos of cake and daughter and of daughter blowing out candle on cake.

The trolley comes through the door and the singing now becomes louder and more focused, and the door closes behind the waitress to leave just that main cast of characters: Louise and her now very fast and seat-bound gyration; her mother with an eye to the camera and her lips moving softly to the birthday song; and Louise's friends, who are all piping up the lyrics and eagerly anticipating the taste of the sugary cake; and the shift manager who has now produced a rather sharp and menacing looking knife from the trolley; and the waitress, who has parked the trolley in the corner of the dining room next to the tail-end of the birthday message and is now setting up plates in front of the guests.

And but now a headless Dr. Rabbit emerges from the employee's back room with the thick stench of cigarette smoke caught in his suit and with the bulging rabbit head underneath one arm, and looks to be in a generally just disheveled and hopeless state of fed-up, pent-up rage,

and as he marches through the floor of the arcade like he has done on so many occasions before but only this time with actual conviction for his decisions, he looks at all of the shocked faces around him: wide eyes of disbelief that this oversized symbol of childhood joy and friendliness has an actual face and beard and sweat, and he walks through the subdued faces and when he sees the face of the shift manager there in the dining room he begins to pick up speed and intensity. And he pushes aside an overly aggressive father by the dance machine and barges through the dining room door in a fury and sees the shift manager and the waitress there in the corner, at the other end of the room next to some girl in a hideous sweater and a toothy grin on her face, and Dr. Rabbit walks directly past the array of girls at the table to come face-to-face with the manager. He throws down the rabbit head at his feet and it rolls awkwardly to one side but suddenly (due to one of the ears) stops and stares up at headless Dr. Rabbit: the face of rabbit, staring metaphysically at the body of rabbit in some paradox of mammalistic rage.

He screams in ire, Dr. Rabbit, and clutches hold of some of the manager's starchy blue shirt and screams some more, eyes bulging with the veins in his temples. The manager pulls his head back, noticing and disgusted by the reeking breath of the doctor, something akin to beer and cigarettes, and immediately becomes frustrated with his employee at the state he is in and says he wishes to speak to him in private and away from these lovely and esteemed guests. Dr. Rabbit, of course, refuses and reaches down for a handful of cake, unsure of what he will do with it. Red and thick and creamy, the cake rests in his meaty paws with weight, and Dr. Rabbit takes one more look at his manager and realizes what to do, and smears the red cake on the starchy shirt, and the cake runs down it—down the tie and onto the pants—and onto the floor, and a few bits land on the rabbit head which is still staring up at its previous owner. The manager, appalled and shocked, begins to shake and become even more upset, and begins to frustrate Dr. Rabbit further by further suggesting a private meeting in his office to talk things through, to which Dr. Rabbit

picks up more of the cake and decides, screaming through boozy odors, to throw against the wall. The lumps of cake make deep thuds against the decorated wall, and just as had happened on the manager's shirt, begin to slide down to the ground.

Then, as a last attempt to make an impact on these people, he bends down with his crazy and neglected eyes and screams once more into the face of Louise herself. Dr. Rabbit watches as the facial features of Louise morph into a state of shock and terrified paralysis. He takes another fistful of cake and shoves most of it in his mouth in an act of complete spite before heading out of the room and leaving that group of aghast onlookers behind. A gasp can be heard from Louise's mother and an incredibly high-pitched wail from Louise herself as the doctor walks away. Patrons in the arcade stare right into Dr. Rabbit's worn-out eyes, terrified and bewildered all at the same time. Dr. Rabbit breaks into a horrific cackle as he pushes through the swinging doors at the back and flips the arcade the bird. He takes a shirt from his employee's locker, and heads outside for the very last time.

Standing beside the shiny black doors of his employer's BMW, Dr. Rabbit heaves a brick through the tinted window. Glass smashes and falls into the car's interior as a shrill alarm rings out over the surrounding parked cars. Gasoline flows through the window in splashes, spurts of it sloshed everywhere inside—on the leather seats and the floor space and the doors, and now a Zippo lighter follows and now the car, caught on the flame and fueled by the gasoline, begins to burn slowly. And Dr. Rabbit stands: cigarette in mouth made red and evil-like from the heavy cake, watches his old life burn away.

Goodbye.