CHAPTER 1

Well, Here's 80. And It's Making an Entrance.

There it is.

An eight. A zero.

Put them together and they get awfully sure of themselves. They're on the birthday cards, floating in gold above the living room, and planted right in the middle of the cake. You'd think those two had rented the place.

Eighty.

Back when you were younger, eighty belonged to a whole different group of people. They wore beige cardigans, kept peppermints in their purses, and said things like, "You'll understand when you're older."

As far as you could tell, they'd always been eighty. It never occurred to you that they'd once gone dancing, gotten into trouble, or sneaked a second helping of dessert when nobody was looking.

And now you're sitting at your own birthday table, staring up at that gold eight and that gold zero, thinking:

This can't be right. I was just forty-seven.

Granted, there've been a few Christmases since then. A few summers, several hairstyles, and somewhere in the neighborhood of three hundred family gatherings. Still, eighty did sneak up on you.

One minute you're telling your kids to be home by ten. The next, those same kids are telling you to get down off that chair and leave the curtains alone.

Funny how the rules change when the kids start making them.

An eightieth birthday often begins well before the birthday itself. It begins the moment the family decides that the day should be “something really special.”

That sounds sweet.

And it is.

It also means people start making secret phone calls, fall silent when the birthday girl walks in, and ask an unusually persistent question:

“You don’t have any plans Saturday, do you?”

Of course she has plans. She’s turning eighty. You don’t just squeeze that in between folding the laundry and making dinner.

Still, the family acts as if she’ll have to be coaxed into attending her own birthday party.

“Put on something nice,” her daughter says.

“I always put on something nice.”

“I know. Just something a little dressier this time.”

“What’s wrong with the rest of my clothes?”

“Nothing! It’s a special occasion.”

“What kind of special occasion? A party or a funeral?”

By now the daughter wishes she’d never brought it up. The birthday girl, on the other hand, leans back in her chair, quite pleased with herself. Eighty years of experience will teach you how to throw an entire family planning committee off balance in three questions.

On the big day, the phone rings earlier than usual. Much earlier.

The first call is from a friend who wants to make absolutely sure you know she remembered.

“I wanted to be the first!”

“You are.”

“Did I wake you?”

“Oh, no. I lie in bed fully dressed at seven every morning, waiting for people to call.”

Then come the children, the grandchildren, the former neighbors, the old coworkers, and a woman she hasn’t heard from in twelve years. That last caller has the date down cold. The age is a little fuzzier.

“Happy seventieth!”

“Thank you. That was awfully sweet of you ten years ago, too.”

By eight thirty, the phone battery is halfway gone and she’s only had her first cup of coffee. It dawns on her that a milestone birthday is part national holiday, part press conference, and part call center.

Everybody wants to know how you’re doing.

What are you supposed to say?

“Fine,” usually.

It’s easier than saying:

“Pretty good, all things considered. My left knee’s been forecasting the weather since Tuesday, and I still don’t know why I went into the kitchen.”

At eighty, you can give the short answer. It’s one of the perks. So is the right to end a call with, “Well, my coffee’s getting cold.”

Years ago, you’d have looked for a polite excuse. These days, cold coffee is reason enough. You didn’t make it

through eight decades just to drink lukewarm coffee on your birthday.

Then the guests arrive.

First come the punctual ones. Then the very punctual ones. Then the relatives who always say, “We didn’t want to be early.”

They’re an hour and a half late and bring flowers that must have taken a small logistics team to get through the door. Within minutes the living room is full of bouquets, gift bags, coats, and people who don’t know what to do with their hands.

Everyone wants to give the birthday girl a hug. Some handle her like fine china. Others squeeze hard enough to check whether all the parts are still attached.

Then someone says, “Wow, you still look great!”

Still?

What exactly were they expecting? That she’d turn eighty, go pale, make a little crackling sound, and crumble into dust?

Of course she looks great. Her hair is done, her blouse fits, and she found just the right shade of lipstick. The shoes took a little longer. There was a lively debate between elegance and self-preservation.

Elegance won. Self-preservation is waiting by the front door in the form of a pair of flats.

The loveliest moment of the day comes when all the guests are together and the room finally goes quiet.

It lasts about four seconds.

Then somebody wants a picture.

A group picture.

Getting an entire family into one photograph is one of the great tests of human patience. First, a grandchild is missing. Then the son-in-law is in the bathroom. One child refuses to stand next to his brother, an aunt worries that nobody will see her in the back, and somebody has to explain why you can't take the picture straight into the light from the window.

"Everybody move in a little!"

Twenty people move in twenty different directions.

"Grandma, right in the middle!"

Of course Grandma goes in the middle. She's the reason everybody's there, the center of attention, and probably the only person who'll remember later how everyone in the picture is related.

When they're finally all in place, someone asks, "Where's Aunt Carol?"

Aunt Carol has been behind the camera for five minutes.

After the picture comes the cake.

It's big, festive, and covered with enough whipped cream to conceal a few small household items. There are two candles in the middle, an eight and a zero. A practical decision. Eighty individual candles would have taken up the entire cake.

"Make a wish!" one of the grandchildren calls out.

The birthday girl looks around the table.

What do you wish for when you've already lived through so much?

Good health, maybe. As much as possible.

A few more lovely days.