

Dad stands on the bleachers with his arms crossed and looking very serious. It's kinda funny seeing him stand like that because, from here, you can see all the other dads standing in the exact same very serious manner. Their arms across their chests, feet set wide, chin slightly up, and eyes with this sort of suspecting look to them, darting around like they're trying to size up every kid against his own.

The moms are barely visible behind the wall of dads in front. They're mostly just chatting with each other with deeply interested facial expressions. That, or reading a glossy non-fiction with BIG CAPITAL LETTERS AND A COLON: Then a corny subtitle explaining what that clever little title is supposed to mean. Mom peers out from behind dad and does that cute little wave she does sometimes where it looks like she's trying to grab something. I wave back to her, normally.

I'm suddenly very aware of Mom's breakfast sitting quite uneasily in my stomach. The timing couldn't be worse. I'm lined up here in the farthest of eight lanes from the spectators who I have trouble seeing since my competition's muscular adolescent limbs keep swinging in and out of the line of sight. Everybody's swinging their arms and straightening their legs with impressive flexibility according to what I can tell are rigidly established pre-race rituals. I just stand there looking dumb, in exactly the same way as five days ago, my 16th birthday, sitting there like an idiot trying to figure out what to do with myself while everybody sings happy birthday. A generic frosting covered cake with little spirally blue things around the border and a single skinny candle. In blue frosting and some rather terrible cursive, it says

HAPPY BIRTHD

and then it gets cut off there because somebody apparently tried to scrape off my name and botched it, taking off a few innocent letters in the process and leaving an unsightly mess of blue frosting where the name should have been. Also, there's a rib there. Just one though. It's all cold and not even covered in barbeque sauce. At least it's fully cooked, I think. Mom glares at Socks. Socks puts up his sticky blue hands like it's not his fault. So the story goes, Mom drives to the grocery store to buy a cake and asks to have my name on it. Mom goes off to pick out some other groceries while they get it ready. Socks has been waiting all morning in an apron and hairnet disguised as a free-sample hander outer person. Why he chose to hand out whole blocks of unsalted butter and why nobody stopped him is beyond me. Seeing Mom walk off to analyze the cost-to-weight ratio of some canola oil, and seeing the bakery lady about to ice my name onto the cake, Socks abandons his post and the whole long line of prospective free butter recipients and beelines it for the bakery section where the always charismatic Socks somehow convinces the lady to, and this is exactly what he told her, 'put happy birthday ribs on it.' And the lady, slightly confused at the strange request but thoroughly charmed by the new employee, actually agrees to do it. And Socks guns it out the door before Mom can recognize him and just as the shift manager starts to notice an impatient mob near the strangely empty unsalted butter section. And so it goes, Mom brings home the cake in an opaque white cardboard box with a complimentary

candle scotch-taped on top, and she puts it in the fridge for the time being. Grandma and Grandpa are over and they're telling me how much I've grown and how they can't believe that such a handsome boy like me doesn't have a girlfriend yet. Socks is sarcastically joining in on their assault of my dignity. But then he excuses himself and takes an extra long time in the bathroom before coming back licking his fingers. I made the conscious decision not to question him about this fact. Mom announces that it's time for cake and she proudly brings the box out from the fridge and centers it in front of me on the table. I noticed that the tape sealing the box is missing and the cardboard is a bit torn where the tape should have been. Everyone squeezes in around the small dining table and mom brings a lighter over. She opens the box and slides the cake out and, lo and behold, the rib, sitting there on the mangled area of icing where my name should have been. Thinking this was some sort of idiotic joke, which it was, mom turns to Socks who then explains the whole story and how it's not his fault the lady at the grocery store misinterpreted what he had said and had put a literal "happy birthday rib" on the cake. And then how he had snuck into the kitchen while nobody was looking and checked the cake to make sure the lady did it right and, discovering that she not only did not do it right, but that she had still written my boring old birth certificate name on the cake as requested by Mom, Socks heroically took it upon himself to scrape off the mistaken name leaving only HAPPY BIRTHD and the rib, which he admits he finds pretty funny. Socks was going on about how the stupid lady at the grocery store didn't even execute the wrong interpretation correctly. She only put one rib on the cake, Socks had distinctly said 'ribs,' as in plural. Mom wasn't particularly happy with this explanation, however, she had no choice now but to light the candle and sing along with everybody singing happy birthday in unison, except Socks, who would yell RIIIIIIII-IIIIBS extra loud whenever it got the part with my name so that you couldn't even hear anybody else singing that other name. That's how it feels now, standing here in only a speedo, awkwardly watching everybody go through their stretching routines. Although actually, now that I think about it, that's not how I felt at all. This was the first birthday ever where I didn't just sit there being sung happy birthday to like an idiot who didn't know what to do with himself, because this time, sitting there listening to Socks sing his heart out in his obnoxiously terrible singing voice, I was grinning the whole way, like an idiot who didn't care at all what anybody thought. The frosted rib tasted godawful, but that's not the point.