

**Some of the words:
Birthday**

Grace Hols

Remember the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words”? Well, I have a lot of pictures: black and white, some already fading. So I am trying to write the words, or at least a few of them. This process involves an intimate study of a photo, to the point where I take a magnifying glass to zoom in and capture details otherwise overlooked. The result of all this is a growing collection of vignettes that I am calling “Some of the words.”

Birthday

There they sit, around the table for Clarence’s birthday, fourth or fifth, we are not sure. Mom, Clarence, Ally, Lucy, Henry and Ann. Dad’s not in the photo; he was working. I am not in the photo either, so I must have taken it with Dad’s prized 35 mm camera. Henry and Ann both have elbows on the table and are resting their heads on their hands, looking a little bored or tired. The table is a new grey Formica one, with grey plastic and chrome chairs to match. There used to be a homemade heavy wooden table in the kitchen, and this is a new set Mom was very proud of. She has set out her precious Bavaria dessert plates, and on each plate is a little spoon with a festive ribbon tied around it. Also on the table is a balloon with a face hand-painted on it for the occasion; she had extra time that day! In the centre of the table, under a blaze of lit candles, is a large cake. Mom has made her usual sponge cake (we had chickens and lots of eggs) and iced it with Japanese frosting from the *Five Roses* cookbook, which had a beaten egg white and almond flavouring in it. Clarence proudly holds a big knife, also festooned with a large bow, and the camera has caught him at just the right moment, cutting into the cake with the serious but proud smile of a pre-schooler now allowed to do this all by himself.

There is no one else at the party except for our family. It was a different world then. We had no phone, and had only recently got electricity. We were five miles from town and with only a pickup truck to get around, our trips into town were carefully planned because time and gas were in short supply. So this was our after-school snack. Clarence must have waited all day, and I can imagine how that went. He was home alone with Mom while the rest of us were in school, and they must have spent the day getting ready. He probably helped blow up the balloons and maybe even “helped” bake and decorate the cake; for sure he would have been allowed to lick the hand-operated beater Mom used to make the icing. He probably asked a million times if it was time for us to come home. Maybe Mom had him watch out the window to wait for the bus to go up Silverthorne Hill so he would know we were on our way.



Clarence's birthday party, early 1960s. From the author's personal collection.

Behind the table is the blue linoleum which went halfway up the wall. Above that the wall was painted pink. In the corner is the white cupboard with two doors built by Dad out of one by fours he had probably cut himself. The bottom door opened to a firewood bin, which the younger boys kept full from the pile outside. The top cupboard was where Mom kept our clothes, piles of homemade sweaters and pants and knitted socks. The only store-bought things were underwear, and, if

they could afford it, they would have well-made white *hempies* and *broekies* ('undershirts' and 'underpants') sent from Holland. A worn pair of oven mitts hangs on the wall next to the new white electric range Mom now cooked on. They had recently replaced the old black and chrome McLarey woodstove that could be so finicky if the firewood was wet. The new electric range must have been fun for her to bake the cake in, although I missed the old McLarey stove. It was always warm and cozy, and there was a small corner next to that stove where I loved to curl up with whatever book I was reading at the time.

I guess we sang happy birthday and ate the cake and drank the Freshie that we usually had in those days. I am sure Clarence got to open a package containing a new truck or a toy of some sort. Then it was probably time for Ann and Henry to feed the calves and collect the eggs and for me to peel potatoes for supper, which followed shortly after. I wonder how much supper we would have eaten that day, with our stomachs full of cake!

