

Half a Century Old

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Rain drenched the South Carolina lowcountry the day before I turned fifty. Maybe the sky cried the tears that would have otherwise melted my heart if I had let them trickle from my eyes, saddened by the passage of time yet grateful for my state in life.



During the dark hours of my birthday eve, I occasionally lifted my head from my pillow, reading the glowing red numbers on the clock radio through bleary eyes, noting the time at 11:57 p.m. The next time I glanced over, groggy with sleep, it was 12:20 a.m. and I was fifty years old. A birthday cannot be held at bay. One morning you wake up in your forties and on another you begin a new decade. I guess the blessing is in the waking up.

I was up above the clouds at the end of my fourth decade, flying from Atlanta to Savannah on a Friday morning, over a landscape I had become friends with some twenty years ago. It dawned on me that this was the last flight I would take as a forty-something and for a moment, I imagined myself suspended above the earth, ageless and unknown, a cryogenic form of my real self. No one knew where I was at that very moment. My family, friends and co-workers were aware I would be flying home that day, but at that precise moment in time, I was essentially alone.

Flight releases us from the earth. Yes, I was belted into seat 20E beside an attractive, older woman intent on filling every square in her Sudoku puzzle book, but I was not landlocked. I witnessed time moving forward in the orange cracks of the horizon, the sun breaking through, signaling a new day. In the short flight — so short in fact that we are informed there will be no beverage service — I was undefined and unknown. Maybe that is how the soul exists after death until God recognizes it.

The odds are against my living to be one hundred years old and therefore, I accept that I have truly crossed the bold and solid line of my mid-life. In fact, I probably did that a few years ago. If I live to be eighty, I have already consumed 63% of my life. What will I do with the remaining 37%? What will my morphing body allow me to do? What physical punishments have I yet to endure because of the poor choices made in my youth? How will my genetics weigh in against me or possibly turn in my favor?

My paternal grandmother died in her fifties. She was best friends with cartons of Camels and a gourmet with bacon grease, but her work ethic was unsurpassed as she cleaned offices at night for supplemental income to send her boys to private high schools. My maternal grandmother lived to be eighty-three. She worked in a high-school cafeteria and I can hear her kidding around with the students and the other lunch ladies. I imagine her walking home on Carrick Avenue in Pittsburgh, stopping in at the back room of the Melrose Grill, ordering a shot of Seagram's Seven and a bottle of Iron City beer from Danny, the balding Italian bartender in black horn-rimmed glasses and a white short-sleeved shirt.

At the end of my forties, I was in the air. On the eve of my fifties, I am on the water, crossing the Calibogue Sound in the rain, watching dolphins flip their tails in a dance with the air as they swim off of the starboard side of the Palmetto Trader, a ferry that runs from Hilton Head to Daufuskie Island. I spend my birthday with my husband at the Melrose Inn, drinking black

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coffee and hot apple cider, my birthday seasoned with changing tides, quiet glances and chance kisses. The coincidence of the Melrose in my grandmother's past became apparent to me as I rose the Sunday morning of my birthday.

It was important to me to attend church on the occasion of my personal half century and the only religious service on the island was held at The First Union African Baptist Church of Daufuskie Island. That morning, the pastor reminded the small gathering of three things in life that never return: a spent arrow, the spoken word and lost opportunities. Sitting on a primitive wooden bench in a church dating back to 1881, I thought about the opportunity I seized to watch the sun rise a few hours earlier. The horizon of the Atlantic Ocean was layered in clouds and the sun weaved in and out of the white-gray billows like an embroiderer's needle piercing holes in the blue linen of the sky. A passing shrimp boat accessorized the tapestry, pulling its net and scouring the ocean floor for treasure, a metaphor for my life's journey, searching in the dark for priceless baubles of wisdom, answers to mysteries I will never solve.

There was no rain on my birthday on Daufuskie Island. There were birthday wishes on my cell phone from the friends and family wrapped around my life and I did cry a few tears that morning remembering the disastrous falls, giant leaps and bloody bruises of my life. In an essay my brother Stanley wrote for me as a present for my BIG, BIG, BIG birthday, he reminded me that my dad was looking down on me "with his glorious blue eyes" shining and that plain and simply, I am loved. Does it get any better than that? At fifty, I am loved. There is no better gift.