



## HAPPY BIRTHDAY PAPA

by *Laura Guyer*

The dull clang of the phone shattered the silence of the dim and gloomy room. The old man looked at the phone as if it were his enemy, and then scuffled across the room to answer it. A liver-spotted hand unhooked the receiver and pressed it to his ear. "Yeah, hello?"

"Papa, is that you?"

"Who else would it be?"

"Stop it, Papa. I just called to wish you a happy birthday."

Silence.

"Well, don't put yourself out, Linda."

"Papa, please don't be hateful. I've told you why I can't be there tonight. It's just that . . ."

"It's just that you got more important things than my birthday. So go. Have fun. Maybe I'll go visit your mother, may she rest in peace."

"Papa, please stop."

"Listen Linda, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Happy birthday, Papa."

He placed the receiver back in its cradle and walked to the closet to get his coat. "I'll take myself out to dinner; I'll show her," he grumbled.

The November wind nearly knocked him off his feet when he came out the door, and the sky held the somber hue of dusk. "Damn this weather," he cursed. Slowly he plodded the two blocks to Joe's Cafe. The cafe door opened into a grimy room filled with noisy people. The aroma of burnt food

permeated the air, and the jukebox blasted "Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones. The old man took a stool and drummed his fingers on the stained formica while he waited for the waitress.

She was avidly flirting with two men who closely resembled Neanderthals in denim.

"Uh, Miss . . ."

"Just a minute." Pause. Blush. Titter.

"All I want is a bowl of soup."

"I said just a minute."

"But . . ."

"Look old man. . ."

The old man's eyes glazed over. "Just because you're young you got no respect for your elders. You're just like my Linda, no love or respect; you only think of yourself!" He whirled his stool around and blindly pushed his way out of the cafe.

"Old fart," said the waitress under her breath.

By now it was dark and the two blocks home seemed longer. "Damn kids," he muttered. "Damn weather." His house was a dark silhouette in the night and he stumbled up the steps to his porch. "Damn steps." He groped for his key and pushed the door open. Then, from the darkness behind him came a distant piercing scream. He flipped his porch light on and stared down the street into the black night. He saw nothing, no struggle or crime. Then it came again from far away, a scream and then a young woman's voice.

"Oh God, someone help me—"

The old man flipped off the light and bolted his door. "She probably asked for it," he said as he headed for bed.

For a second time that evening the clang of the phone broke the silence. The old man fumbled for his watch and then clawed at the telephone. It was only 11:00.

"Yeah, hello?"

"Is this a Mr. Harold Goldman?"

"It is."

"Is a Miss Linda Goldman your daughter?"

"Is my Linda in trouble?"

"Mr. Goldman, this is Lt. Clark down at the police station. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but uh, your daughter Linda was murdered tonight. . .Mr. Goldman, are you there?"

"Yes," a feeble voice whispered.

"I'm sorry sir, but we need you to come down and sign a release for the body. Oh yeah, and you can pick up the things that were left in her car too. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, I'll be there soon."

Harold Goldman dropped the phone and slowly put on his clothes. He was silent as the tears streamed down his face. He thought it was funny that the same day that could bring you life could also take it away.

When he got to the police station, he was taken directly to the morgue, where he identified his Linda. They told him she had been dragged from her car, strangled, and dropped just outside of town. They'd identified her by a caterer's receipt in her pocket with her name and number on it. Harold could barely look at her. He thought of the words they had had that evening and his heart nearly broke.

"Mr. Goldman, if you would sign for the things we found in her car, you can go on home."

Harold followed the officer into a room abuzz with activity. The officer

handed him a form and said, "Sign by the X please. Thanks."

Mr. Goldman looked up at the policeman. "Officer, why didn't you come tell me about my Linda yourself. Why did you have to call?"

"I'm sorry sir, but tonight we were all busy and we couldn't spare a man."

"You were so busy you let my Linda get killed. No one cares anymore; no one cares. . ."

"I'm sorry sir. Look, I'll have 'em bring her stuff out."

The officer disappeared into a back room. The old man hardly saw the people around him; he could only think about his Linda.

"Mr. Goldman, if you'll follow me, you can pick up her things."

Goldman tottered and steadied himself. "Officer, where did they find her car?"

They passed into a room filled with tagged articles waiting to be claimed. "It was over on Oakmont, I think."

"Oakmont? Why, that's a block or so from where I live. Why weren't you people patrolling over there? No one cares, that's why. First my Linda, and you know I heard another poor girl attacked by my house tonight—"

He stopped talking and froze in fear. It couldn't have been her; why would she have parked so far away? No, no. It's the police's fault 'cause no one cares.

"Here you go, Mr. Goldman."

Harold Goldman looked down at the table. There he saw a present wrapped in brilliant paper, a cake with rosettes, and two packages of streamers.

"Oh yeah, and this was in there too."

The officer took a large roll of paper and unfurled it. On it was scrawled in paint:



Surprise Papa  
Happy B'Day  
I LOVE YOU