

Machine of Death: Flaming Marshmallow

by Camille Alexa

I'm so freaking excited I can hardly stand it.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow is my birthday, *the* birthday. The birthday everybody waits and waits for and until you get there you just hate that all your old friends already got theirs and you're the only one without it yet, and sometimes you think *holy-freaking-eff, I'm never going to turn sixteen*, but then you do.

At first I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep. I turn off the light, but after lying in the dark for half an hour, I turn it back on. I look at the calendar hanging on the wall above my bed. I reach up, lift it off its nail with one hand and snuggle back under the covers, taking the calendar with me and running a finger over all the red Xs marked over all the days leading up to this one. It's a little cold out, and the last thing in the universe I want to do is catch a freaking cold the week of my birthday, so I snuggle down into the warmth of my flannel sheets even more. I know there're going to be parties this weekend, and I'm going to want to go.

This is what I've been waiting for all these months. All these years, I guess, though before my friends started getting theirs, it didn't seem like such a big deal. We were all No-Knows then.

Tomorrow, I'm finally going to feel like I belong.

Tomorrow, I'm going to find out how I die.

"Carolyn! Yo, girl, wait up!"

At the sound of my name I turn around. It's Patrice. I can see her bounding up across the commons toward me. Her super-long hair is braided today, and as she runs it whips around at the sides of her head like two angry red snakes with ribbons tied to their tails.

"Hey, Patrice," I say, and clutch my books closer to my chest. I try to walk a little faster, thinking maybe she'll get the hint. She doesn't.

"Today's the Big Day, huh?" she says.

I nod.

She turns her head away, bites her lip.

"Lucky," she says.

I shrug, speed up even more. It's not my problem she's one of the smartest kids in our class and they moved her up a grade, like, four years ago. It's not my fault she's going to be a No-Know for another whole year.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Brad Binder. He is so freaking cool – a burner, they say. *That's hot*, I think, and then I laugh to myself.

"What's so funny?" asks Patrice. We're at my locker, so I balance my books on my knee with one hand while I fumble my combo-lock with the other. I pretend I don't hear her, but she sees me flicking sly glances in Brad Binder's direction.

"Not *him*," she says, rolling her eyes. "You can't be serious."

“Shhh!” I try to shut her up. I wish I had some kind of freaking superpower or something. I wish I could just concentrate really hard and make her go away.

Brad Binder pulls his letter jacket out of his locker, which is so close to mine, three other girls have asked to trade lockers with me. He shrugs his perfect – so freaking perfect! – shoulders into his jacket and takes out just a notebook with a pencil shoved in its rings. No computer, no books, no nothing. God, that’s so freaking cool. Just like a burner.

As Brad walks away, Patrice fixes me with one of those stares of hers. “He’s not that great, you know. I heard he kisses like a dead lizard.”

I guess you’d know, I almost say, but I stop myself. I don’t want to stoop to her level, be so childish. I’m sixteen today and after school my dad’s taking me to the mall to get that slip of paper, and then I’ll know where I really belong. So I shrug again instead, let it slide off me, like egg off Teflon. “He’s a burner,” I say. “They’re pretty cool.”

Patrice snorts. “You know what his slip said? ‘Flaming Marshmallow’. That doesn’t sound like a real burner cause-of-death to me, no matter what he says. He should probably be hanging out with the chokers, instead. You wouldn’t think he was so tough then.”

I’ve had enough of Patrice. “You wouldn’t understand,” I tell her, and walk away toward Geometry class. Maybe Cindy Marshall will be nice to me today, it being so close to me getting my c-of-d slip. Maybe I’ll end up being a crasher, like her.

If only!

I’m almost late getting to class. Mrs. Tharple looks at me extra-sour, but I don’t care. I slide into my seat right as the bell rings, and catch Cindy Marshall’s eye. I smile.

“Don’t even look at me, No-Know,” she says to me, low under her breath as Mrs. Tharple starts handing out our pop-quiz. The other two girls behind her snicker. I can feel their eyes darting against my skin, sharp like the teeth of weasels.

“It’s my birthday,” I say.

She turns in her seat and looks at me full-on. I try to understand the look in her eyes, but I can’t. I feel like it’s something really obvious, like she’s trying to tell me something so, so, so obvious, I should already know it.

I feel really stupid.

Mrs. Tharple walks between us, places our blank quizzes face-up on the desks in front of us, glides on by to the next row and toward the front of the room again.

I look down at my Geometry quiz, try to concentrate, try to ignore the heat in my cheeks and the tips of my ears and on the back of my neck.

“Hey, you,” hisses Cindy Marshall.

I look up.

“So did you get your slip yet?”

I shake my head. “After school,” I tell her.

She narrows her eyes. I can sense the other girls, crashers both, also watching me, but I play it cool. I hope.

She nods. "If you get your c-of-d, and it's crashing – anything: plane, car, bike, hot-freakin'-air balloon, whatever – you come talk to me again. Tomorrow."

I have to bite the insides of my cheeks to keep from smiling. I try to look like this isn't the best offer I've gotten all morning. I try to look tough. I want to be crasher material, I really do.

"Tomorrow," I say, and she nods again, once.

Not one of those girls acknowledges my existence the entire rest of the class, but I don't care. Everything will be different tomorrow.

Tomorrow, my life can begin.

Lunch isn't what I'd hoped for.

I've spent all this time counting down to my birthday, thinking, *this is the day everything changes*, but it isn't. I don't feel like a No-Know anymore, even though technically, I still don't actually know. I'm under eighteen, so I have to have my parent or legal guardian with me to get my slip. If I could've, I would have ditched lunch today, gone to the mall, gotten the whole thing over with. Instead, I have to wait for my dad to get off work. It's so unfair.

So, even if I get my slip tonight, nobody but me is going to know my cause-of-death until tomorrow. Well, my parents will know, and my little brother, I guess. And I'm sure I could call Patrice and tell her, but why? After tomorrow, I'll have new friends to hang out with.

But for today, I'm still stuck in No-Know-ville.

I grab my tray and slide onto the bench at the end of the table. Patrice waves me down further toward her end, but I pretend I don't see her. I line up my eight extra packets of mustard and start tearing the corners off one by one, slowly squeezing out the sharp yellow and gooping it all over the top of my synthesized proteins and pressed vegetable shapes.

Covertly, I scan the room, wondering, fantasizing about where I might be allowed to sit tomorrow. Who's going to welcome me with open arms? It all depends on my c-of-d.

A ruckus is going on over in the corner. Of course it's the burner kids, cracking each other up, starting a food fight. The burners, the drowners, the crashers, the live-wires, and the fallers – all the violent accidentals – they sit in mingled clumps along the two tables in the corner. That's the coolest corner, and I'm pretty sure I'll get to sit there tomorrow, or at least close. The next couple tables out wouldn't be so bad; you've got the med-heads and the sharpies and the bullets – mostly malpractice and murder, right? – though some kids sneak in there who should probably be over with the suicides. I can see those from here, all dressed in black and with pale faces. They look like a bunch of crows, pecking at their food.

Just please don't let me be at one of the last two tables: sickness and old age. Ugh. They look boring even eating lunch. That would be my c-of-d if I was forced to sit at that table: Bored to Death.

"Happy birthday, Carolyn."

I'm so startled I squeeze a mustard packet too hard and it squirts all down the front of my dress. I start to dab it with a napkin, but I'm just turning bitter yellow clumps into bitter yellow smears.

"I'm, I'm so sorry, Carolyn... *eff*. I—I—"

I look up into Jamie's face. We used to be friends, a long, long time ago. He lives just down the street, and we used to ride bikes together every single day. I can still taste the sun and summer dust on my tongue, just looking at him. We stopped hanging out when his parents joined the Anti-MoD League. Sometimes, on the way home from school, I see his mom standing out in front of the mall with her placard and her sandwich board. "Lives are for Living" say her signs some days. Others, "People Against Machines of Death" or even, "Don't Ask, Don't Know – You Have a Choice!"

Jamie's almost eighteen, and he's still a No-Know. I'd just die if that were me. I'd just die.

"It's okay, Jamie," I tell him. "Don't worry about it."

He has a couple of napkins in his hands, and he's dipping them in his water and holding them out to me. He started to dab one on my chest, but figured out in time it probably wouldn't be such a good idea.

I hope Jamie doesn't see my ears and neck turn red. He's one of the few people who knows me too well for me to hide it.

"Your mom picking you up after school?" he asks.

I keep dabbing, shake my head. "My dad."

He nods. He's watching the motions of my hands as I rub the damp napkins on my lap, on the fabric stretched across my ribs, but he's not really seeing me.

"I'm sorry," he says again, and I don't think he's talking about mustard.

By the time Dad picks me up, I'm mentally exhausted.

He kisses the top of my head when I get into the car. "Hey kid! Happy special day."

"Thanks."

I throw my stuff in the back seat and fasten my lapbelt.

Dad's just sitting there with a lopsided smile on his face. "You want to go get an ice cream first, or something?" he says. "You want pizza? A movie?"

How can he be so freaking clueless? I want to tell him what a moron he's being, but when I look at him something feels like it slips sideways in my stomach. For the first time, I'm looking at the fortysomething man with the glasses and the stubbled cheeks and the ugly sweater, and I don't see my dad.

I mean yes, of course, I see my dad; the middle-aged med-head c-of-d (accidental overdose) with the over-expensive house and the boring job and the two kids and last-year's-last-year's car, bought cheap with high mileage from a rental fleet...

But I also see a guy. I see a guy who loves me so much, he can't even put it into words. It never occurred to me to think this might be a big deal for him, the day I get my slip. He looks tired, I think. More tired than usual.

I reach out and put my hand on his where it's resting on the steering wheel.

"Sure, Dad," I say. "Whatever you want."

He covers my hand with his other one, so it's kind of like a handsandwich, my fingers and knuckles pressed between two layers of his. His eyes look a little bright for a second, but I decide it's only my imagination as he places my hand back in my own lap and starts the car and pulls out from the curb.

I watch the school get smaller and smaller in the side mirror as we drive away.

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I finish off the last of my ice-cream cone, and so does Dad. We wipe our sticky fingers on the wet-wipes and throw those away, and I get up from our food-court table and gather all my bags as I stand. Dad's bought me a new pair of shoes, two new books, and a hat he says I look great in, but which I know I'll never, ever wear again in a million billion. All I'm missing is the partridge in a pear tree.

"So...what next, Birthday Girl? Need some new gloves? Music? You used to love the music store."

He's walking over to the mall directory, studying the list of stores. I walk up to him, set down my bags of books and shoes, and touch his arm. "Dad," I say. "It's time."

He doesn't look at me right away. He takes off his glasses and starts to clean them on the edge of his sweater. I can see he's just making them all linty and smeary, so I take them from him and clean them on the inside hem of my dress instead. When I hand them back they're considerably cleaner, and I pick up my bags and start walking in the direction of the slip kiosk. I don't have to look up the location on the mall directory; I know exactly where it is. There's not a fifteen-year-old in the country who doesn't know the location of the nearest machine. I know its hours of operation (regular mall open-hours: ten a.m. to nine p.m.), I know how much it costs (nineteen-ninety-five-plus-tax), I even know the brand (Death-o-Mat, by DigCo.; "We Give the Same Results—For Less!").

The only thing I don't know is what's going to be on that strip of paper when it scrolls out of that slot.

It's getting kind of late, and the mall's going to close soon. Most of the stores are empty. It's a school night, so nobody my age is around. It's mostly tired-looking shop clerks with achy feet, and straggly-haired moms pushing heavy strollers.

The machine kiosk is in a darkish corner over by the restrooms. The janitor has the door propped open to the ladies', and even though I kind of have to go, I'm not about to brave the janitor and his stinky mop. Besides, I don't want to put this off anymore. I need to know.

Dad pauses when we get to the machine. He fumbles with his wallet, pulls out his identity and credit cards. He clears his throat, but doesn't say anything, doesn't look at me.

I thought Dad's hand shook a little when he slid his cards into their proper slots and keyed in his and my social security numbers and other information, but I'm sure I was imagining things. It was probably just my brain buzzing. That's what it feels like inside my head right now; like all the curves and loops and folds of my brain are buzzing with tiny bees, or maybe electric currents. I guess brains *are*, after all, though. Filled with electric currents, that is, not tiny bees.

The machine's green light comes on and an arrow points to the small, shiny, self-cleaning divot in the otherwise dull metal. I set my bags down at my feet, slowly reach one finger toward the indentation –

“Carolyn!”

I jump, look up into Dad’s face.

He pushes his glasses back on the bridge of his nose, fumbles it a little, blinks.

“Um...for an extra five dollars, it will tell you your blood type, your glucose levels, and whether or not you’re pregnant.” He points to the list printed on the machine’s face. Then he frowns, distracted.

“Hey, there’s no way you might be pregnant, is there?”

I close the tiny distance between us and wrap my arms around his waist. He hugs me back, and for a second, as I breathe in the warm furry-sweatered dadness of him, I feel like the most precious and important thing in the universe.

Without letting go of Dad or giving him any warning, I reach behind him and jab my finger into the shiny divot. Dad flinches, and presses my face closer to his chest.

A tiny slicing pain flits across my finger, then numbness as the machine sprays its analgesic and disinfectant.

I pull back from Dad, and he clears his throat and lets me go. The machine spits out Dad’s two cards from their slots, and my slip scrolls out from the single slot below. Dad and I both reach for it, but when I freeze he pulls back. I’ve got to do this, and he knows it. He plucks his plastic from the machine and slides the cards into his wallet while I uncurl my slip and read.

I read it three times. Four times. I’m on my fifth when Dad, unable to contain himself, gently tugs the paper from my stiff fingers and reads aloud.

“Death by...Millennium Space Entropy,” he says.

“But...”

Dad wraps both arms around me and swings me up into the air like he hasn’t done since I was a very, very little girl. I keep my arms stiff, but let my legs and body go limp, and Dad twirls me in a circle, laughing, joyous.

He finally sets me down, and I have to reach out a hand to steady myself against the edge of the machine. I’m a little dizzy. Dizzy, and confused.

“Millennium Space Entropy!” says Dad, shaking his head, unrolling the slip and reading it again. “That’s amazing, Carolyn. It’s fantastic! You’ll be nearly a thousand years old by the next millennium. Maybe you live to be a thousand! Just think, medical breakthroughs all the time, vastly extended lifespans... It could happen, sweetheart. It could really happen.”

Dad, grinning, crushes me to his chest again, and I can hear the rumble of his happiness somewhere deep inside. “I just want you to have a long and happy life, Carolyn. A very long, long, long and happy life.”

“...But Dad,” I say into the nubby wool of his sweater, “...where will I sit tomorrow at lunch?”