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## Hellfire Preachin'

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## Hellfire Preachin'

As a Jehovah's Witness, we had a lot of rules regarding holidays and birthdays- we couldn't participate. I am forced to learn these rules on my own, as I sit in the first grade of Cottage Grove's elementary school, suddenly abandoning coloring in order to talk with Mrs. Tay. Her blonde hair reminds me of sunflowers, and she always smiles when kids ignore me. She brings me to her office, crouching down to explain quietly, "I'm going to have you work in here for a bit, okay? You're not in trouble, just keep drawing. Yes, everything is okay." Behind her, a woman carries in juice, cupcakes, and celebration balloons. Suddenly, confusion is replaced with a thick throat as my stomach reaches the floor. I nod without making eye contact and sit on her chair as the door shuts. I can hear my classmates clapping and hollering in joy as they're delivered sweet, sinful abundance. I am silent, my face feels hot and my eyes burn.

An ungodly shade of pink fills my blurred vision as she slips back into the room. "I know you're not supposed to have any," she hesitates, tucking hair behind her ear before whispering, "but you don't deserve to be left out." Mrs. Tay places a cupcake donned with pink, piped cream flowers gently in front of me. She smooths my wild hair down with her hand, pauses for a moment, just looking at me, then disappears out the door as "Happy Birthday" begins.

Peeling the floral print wrapper away, I touch the spongy cake with a mixture of reverence and fear. I don't pray before this stolen meal. I take a bite. I finally understand the story of Eve and the snake, how temptation and freedom are like gasoline to a man already on fire. I wanted desperately to hate the taste of it. I shouldn't have had any. The celebration of birthdays or holidays is strictly prohibited. Birthdays come from pagan roots, and the Bible condemns any use of magic, divination, or spiritualism outside of our Lord and Savior Jehovah. The only commemoration kept involves the death of Jesus, and as the Bible says, "the day of death is better than the day of birth." Chew, swallow. I hate that I love the taste of the strawberry frosting. I bow my head, allow it to wreck my small frame and seep through my eyes. A crude baptism, a weak cry for deliverance.