

Zoe's Birthday

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“Alright, class, listen up!” Mrs. Taylor announced cheerfully, trying to quieten her chattering, buzzing students. The gleaming faces of the children twisted obediently to face her. Affectionately pulling back her narrow lips and revealing her pearly-white teeth in that beautiful, flattering smile of hers, she spread her hands generously and said, “Today we will be celebrating somebody’s birthday!” These words were greeted by excited, happy glances shared between the students, and several curious whispers of, “Whose birthday is it?”

“And the birthday girl is . . . Zoe!” Mrs. Taylor cried, flashing her dazzling smile at the blushing girl Zoe Jackson sitting in the front row. Zoe’s tangled golden curls of hair tumbled lusciously down her head, and she roughly shoved a blonde strand out of her sparkling sapphire-blue eyes, her freckled face scarlet under the yellow tangles.

“Zoe’s mother will be coming soon for the celebration with a few treats for us,” Mrs. Taylor continued brightly. “So while we’re waiting let’s all come on down to the rug for a story!”

The students clambered down to the rug where Mrs. Taylor read stories aloud to the class. But Mrs. Taylor had barely opened the book when there was a timid knock on the classroom door. A young boy named Jimmy jumped up and scurried clumsily to open it. “It’s Zoe’s mom!” he said the moment he peered cautiously outside. “She’s here for the celebration!”

“Come in, come in,” Mrs. Taylor said, shifting herself elaborately to her feet. “Hello, Mrs. Jackson! Welcome to our classroom.”

Zoe blushed even more fiercely when her mother stepped inside. Her mother always embarrassed her. Mrs. Jackson was struggling helplessly with several plastic bags stuffed with treats, attracting many wondrous stares from the students. “Hello!” Mrs. Taylor said welcomingly, hurrying over. “Here, let me help you with this.” She took a few of the bags, and then turned to the awkwardly waiting students. “Please return to your desks

now, children," she instructed briskly. "Zoe, my dear birthday girl, would you like to help us pass these treats out?"

Zoe delicately traced her tongue over her teeth and nodded shyly, a tentative smile playing hesitantly around her lips. She scrambled over dutifully and glanced briefly at her mother before taking a plastic bag from Mrs. Taylor and proceeding to hand out its contents—potato chips. She affectionately crinkled the plastic as she placed a bag on her own desk. Zoe, like most kids, loved potato chips.

Mrs. Taylor and her mother handed out juice and mini cupcakes. Zoe perched timidly in her seat, watching the delighted students receive their snacks. Most remembered to say thank you.

After everything had been handed out, the class promptly began to sing happy birthday to Zoe. Zoe, her face as red as her mother's poppies in the springtime, watched her singing classmates around her, her sweaty hands desperately trying to hide her face. A boy named Nick sitting next to Zoe smiled tentatively at her as he sang. Zoe frantically brushed a golden tangle of hair out of her face and forcefully smiled back, her lips twisting awkwardly. Nick laughed, his sharp, gleeful cackles mingling with the words of the song, and Zoe couldn't help but laugh, too.

By the end of the song, Zoe's heart was filled with happiness. Her birthday was going perfectly so far.

Mrs. Taylor stood at the front of the room and announced "Now it's time to eat! Remember our rule, children! Nobody is to eat anything before the birthday girl does!"

That was their "class tradition," as Mrs. Taylor put it. Nobody could eat a mouthful until the birthday boy or girl had taken a bite. Mrs. Taylor was very strict on manners, although most children didn't like that.

Zoe, her narrow, thin lips pulled back in a shy smile, carefully picked up her cupcake and timidly dipped her tingling tongue into the rich, creamy vanilla icing. Immediately, her classmates attacked their food like starved puppies. Zoe smothered a giggle. Nick glanced at her, his startling green eyes sparkling with obvious amusement as he licked his own chocolate cupcake. Zoe smiled at him.

“I’m really glad your mom came in and all,” Nick offered uncertainly, tugging at a strand of midnight-black hair.

Zoe shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, I guess.” She stared gratefully at her mother, who was thoughtfully twining a stringy curled rope of golden hair around her finger as she babbled endlessly to Mrs. Taylor. “Although sometimes she *is* a bit embarrassing.”

Nick laughed, his high-pitched, piercing cackles tumbling down his lips like waves. “All moms are embarrassing!” he exclaimed between his uncontrollable giggles.

Zoe stuffed the rest of her cupcake in her mouth and smiled with her lips pressed together tightly. Suddenly, her mother didn’t seem so bad anymore.

When everybody had finished their food, it was time for Mrs. Jackson to leave. Mrs. Taylor said, “What do we say, class?”

“Thank you,” the students chorused obediently. Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Taylor both beamed affectionately at the children.

“Bye, Mom,” Zoe muttered faintly, just loud enough for her mother to hear. Mrs. Jackson rippled her fingers in a kind of wave. And right at that very moment Zoe thought just how lucky she was to have a mother like Mrs. Jackson.