

For the World War Two Dead
A reflection on "Birthday Party" by Katherine Brush
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by tom grayson colonnese

I never should have agreed, I know that now, but I wanted to make Kay happy and I know I have to put the war behind me and learn again to live in this world. So I agreed to this "little occasion," as she put it. We would celebrate my birthday together for the first time in four years. We would go to a small, quiet restaurant near our apartment on 38th Street. I had agreed, but as we sat there together—me with my frozen rictus—I wondered if I was happy, and for what? Happy to be alive? Happy to have my limbs, my head, my life? "I should be happy," I thought. But no feeling of joy filled me; no word of conversation entered my head and the beautiful woman across from me, my wife, seemed a stranger. I thought, "How can I possibly explain?" How can I explain that last year, on my birthday, I was in the Hurtgen Forest and the German artillery tore us apart before we could dig in. How can I explain how the tree bursts turned living men into limbless, headless lumps of dead flesh.

In the midst of this thinking on my part, the headwaiter plopped down a damn cupcake in front of me, a cake with a pathetic pink candle on it. And the little violin and piano combo launched into "Happy Birthday to you," happy damn birthday to you. And, Kay, I know you wanted me to be happy and you were smiling at me and the people at the restaurant were clapping for me, but I wasn't happy and I turned to you and said, "Christ, Kay. Jesus Christ." And your smile evaporated and tears welled up in your eyes and I had to look down. And I wished . . . I just wished.

And when I finally did look up, a little woman was glaring angrily and judgmentally at me from her nearby barquette, and I thought to myself, "Come on now, don't be like that. Please, don't be like that." But they are like that, aren't they, every damn one of them who never saw a forest explode. And my wife is still crying: quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly.