

FLASH NONFICTION

Birthday

by Catherine C. Con



"A Mothers Dance" by Damaris Ruiz Nino

A Story of a friend and her mother.

What happened? What was that wonderful thing? I held my breath and didn't want it to pass. The moon with its ancient yellow face, rising behind the dark silhouette of the old magnolia, spread a layer of golden haze on our small backyard. My mother whispered in my ear:

“Happy birthday, Moon.”

I couldn't hold my breath any longer, so I started breathing quietly, not wanting to disturb anything

It's the Moon Festival.

My mother and I had been busy since I came home from school at three in the afternoon. She put a plate of my favorite pineapple moon cakes and two tangerines on the small stand in the backyard. I helped to drag two stools and placed them by the small stand. She steamed some dumplings and we ate them on the stools, basked in the orange dusk. The sun went down slowly in the cool breeze of September. My mother lit a candle and we waited for the moon to rise. My mother said it was the Moon's birthday. It was a time for families to come together, and there were big parades in town. It was just the two of us in our family — my mother and I — and that was how we celebrated the Moon Festival. It was a magical time.

A few days after the Moon Festival was my birthday. My birthday was the same day as the Confucius' birthday. Confucius' birthday was a national holiday in Taiwan, designated to pay respect to teachers. My mother said that I would be a teacher one day. On my birthday, my mother woke me early. I blinked my eyes and saw the pale pink dawn outside my bedroom window. She asked me softly,

“What is that sound?”

I listened attentively, “The birds chirping?” I said.

My mother lay down next to me and smiled,

“Yes, they are singing a birthday song for you.”

We rose early on my birthday to catch the bus to Sun Moon Lake. By the lake, we always found our spot under the old Japanese Maple. We sat under the shade, facing the lake's gleaming water and the blue mountains on the other side. There was always a piece of sweet red bean cake for this celebration and a cup of noodles for my long life. My mother recounted the joy she experienced during my birth. I was the only infant with a head full of dark hair among all the other bald infants in the hospital nursery. She had always eaten

alone, but not after I was born. I was the best gift she had ever received. My birthday was the most auspicious day in her life.

One year when we got to our spot by the lake, there was another family there. There were a man, a woman, and a little girl. We went further down to another picnic table, and I asked my mother why they had a man and we didn't have one. My mother told me that my father was killed in the war while she was carrying me and that he was watching over us in heaven. He was in the bird song, in the pale pink dawn, in the gleaming water, celebrating my birthday.

I celebrated my birthday by myself when I came to America to study. I went to the only Chinese restaurant on the outskirts of the university and ordered a plate of stir-fried noodles. I called my mother in Taiwan, but she didn't pick up. I called again the next day, and she told me she had gone to Sun Moon Lake the day before and had a piece of sweet red bean cake and a cup of noodles.

I started working and brought my mother to America. She made the sweet red bean cake that I haven't had for years, for my birthday.

My mother's birthday was on January first, New Year's Day. She always said the whole world celebrated her birthday and we didn't have to do anything except to have one cup of noodles. On her first birthday in America, I took her to the Japanese restaurant three blocks from her condo and ordered *Hamachi Kama*, grilled yellowtail collar, for her. It was her favorite. She took her first bite, held her breath, and closed her eyes as she savored both the fish and the moment.

I baked a sweet red bean cake for her at home.