

Trick Candles

By Stephen D. Rogers

Phil opened a beer with one hand while he answered up the telephone with the other. “Yeah.”

“It’s Mary.”

“Don’t you dare say Shellac can’t come this weekend.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to see her tonight.”

Something was up. His ex-wife resented even the court-mandated time he had with his teenage daughter. “Isn’t there school tomorrow?”

“So she’s tired. Today’s her birthday. Who would she rather spend it with than her Dad?”

Something was definitely up. Of course he wanted to see his daughter, but that didn’t mean he was stupid. “What’s in this for you?”

Mary’s voice was syrupy surprise. “Why Phil, how can you say that?”

“Easily.”

“Phil, I don’t want to argue.” Translation: I don’t want to continue because I’ll lose. “Should I drop her off or not?”

“Hell yes.”

“Do you think you can make yourself presentable?”

Phil disconnected, glad he had gone to the trouble of preparing early for the weekend ahead. Shellac was going to be looking for cake and presents, and a defense of last-minute-notice wasn’t going to change that.

Perhaps that was the game Mary was playing. If so, she was wasting the effort. He wasn’t sure Shellac could think less of him.

Finishing his beer and pushing through the swinging half-doors that lead out of the kitchen, Phil took a quick look around the apartment. It would have to do.

The buzzer shrieked and Shellac’s voice came twisted out of the intercom. “It’s me, Shellac.” Mary must have called from just up the street.

After a quick cross of the fingers, Phil pressed the button. “Come on up honey.”

The name had been Mary’s idea. Believing herself victimized by a plain name, she cursed their kid with one that nobody could spell. That was typical Mary, striking a melodramatic pose, not bothering to think things through.

There was a soft knock at the door.

Phil hesitated but brushed the feeling aside. Shellac was not her mother, not for a few years anyway.

He swung open the door. “How’s my little birthday girl?”

“I’m good.” She gave him a half-hearted hug, kissed him on the cheek and wrinkled her nose at the stubble.

“I couldn’t be better now that you’re here.” He brought her into the living room. “Did you eat yet?”

“Mom made me my favorite.”

Phil smiled, hollowed by the fact that he didn’t even know what that would be. “Do you still have room for dessert?”

“I had pie.” Shellac plopped herself on the couch.

“Yes, but you didn’t have any of the birthday cake I bought.”

“No.” She glanced around the room, looking for—what?—something to do, something to open, something to report to Mom?

“I’ve got a present for you.”

Finally, there was sparkle in her eyes. Shellac must have inherited thing-lust from Mary. “Where is it?”

“In the kitchen. Would you something to drink?”

“As long as you bring the present first.”

“I have soda, juice, water.”

“Whatever.”

Phil groaned as the half-door slapped shut behind him. Why did she have to make it so hard? Why couldn’t she just be glad to see him? Why couldn’t they click?

Opening the refrigerator, he chugged another beer as he poured her soda, one eye on the wrapped present. The woman at the store said the game was a hot item. Just let it make Shellac happy, that’s all he asked.

Returning to the living room, he handed Shellac the soda and her present. “I’ll get your birthday cake.”

“Let me open the present first.”

“Sure.” He sat next to her.

Shellac ripped off the paper with a single swipe of her claw, or maybe he drank that last beer too quickly.

His daughter simply stared at the exposed box.

Leaning forward, Phil tried to see into her face. “Isn’t it great?”

“Mom got me this last year.”

Phil went cold. “Well honey, that’s just your first present. We’re sort of practicing for the main event. There will be lots more this weekend.”

“But I’m not coming this weekend.”

What could he say to that? “I’ll get your cake.”

Perhaps it was a mistake to keep seeing her this way. They never had enough time to get past the awkward stage. He wasn’t saying that Mary was right, but given the circumstances, he didn’t have a chance to be anything but wrong.

Pulling the cake out of the refrigerator, he opened the candles and punched a few through the crust of the frosting.

How many birthday cakes had the three of them shared? In the end, all the wishes meant nothing. They had been a family and now they weren’t. Was it really so much to ask that the three of them could be happy together?

What would that take? Phil would need to forget finding Mary in bed with an old flame, Mary would need to think of Phil as something more than a loser, and Shellac....

Suddenly unable to remember how old his daughter was, Phil stabbed the cake with the rest of the candles. Maybe he should just stay in the kitchen, finish off the rest of the beer. Shellac could let herself out when Mary buzzed.

After hunting through the drawer until he found some matches, Phil returned to the living room to place the cake on the coffee table, an offering to the fickle goddess.

“That’s way too many candles.”

The present was abandoned at the far side of the couch, the wrapping paper laying where it had landed. “Not for you honey.”

Shellac shrugged and now she was her mother. Phil closed his eyes. Was the torch being

passed between generations, the utter disappointment in him?

Taking a deep breath, Phil flipped on his best smile and opened the book of matches. "Get ready to sing."

"You don't sing on your own birthday."

"Right." The match flared to life, and Phil dragged it across the candle wicks, delighted at how quickly they caught. He lit the whole bunch on one match. That had to be some kind of record.

Blowing out the match, he started to sing.

Shellac's face glowed in the candlelight. She had her mother's beauty, and whoever she loved would pay the price.

"Happy...birthday...to...you." Drawing out the last line, Phil flung out his arms.

Shellac wasn't impressed. "Are you done?"

"Sure honey."

Shellac took a deep breath, leaned forward, and blew.

Nearly all the candles went out, paused, and then flickered back to life.

Phil froze.

Shellac scrunched up her face, took in another deep breath, and blew at the candles until she sputtered.

They all died, sparked, and were soon blazing away.

Flinging herself back into the couch, Shellac let loose a "What the fuck?"

"Hey, watch your language." Phil leaned forward to get a closer look. "I must have bought trick candles."

"You mean ones that don't work."

He shook his head. "No, they're just really hard to blow out. It's like a joke."

"Some joke. How do I eat the cake? Or is that a joke too?"

Phil sighed. "No, it's yellow." He almost added "your favorite" but suddenly couldn't remember if it was true.

"So how are you going to cut it?"

Ignoring her pout, Phil filled his lungs, concentrated his blow on a single candle.

It died just like that. Then it flickered back to life.

Shellac huffed, the weight of the world on her shoulders. "I could be home on the Internet."

"This is your home too." Sticking his finger into her soda, he flicked it at a candle which hissed.

"I hope I'm getting a new drink."

Perhaps he could turn this around. "Hey, let's get in the spirit. We have a challenge here. Have fun with it. How are we going to put out the candles?"

Shellac sniffed. "Throw the cake out the window."

He would, but only if he could go out after it. "Then you wouldn't get a piece."

"That's okay. It looks store-bought."

Phil was unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "And I suppose Mommy makes them from scratch."

"She goes to the bakery."

Frustrated, Phil picked up her drink and slowly poured it over the cake.

The candles fizzled and died with a gasp of steam and smoke, the soda pooling on top of the frosting.

"Swell. Now you've ruined my birthday cake."

The candles burst back into flames.

Shellac's grin was very nearly wicked: What are you going to do now Mister Daddy?

"We'll just wait." Not even trick candles lasted forever.

"What's the point? There's no way I'm going to eat that cake." She paused. "I hate coming here."

There it was, out in the open.

Even if she hadn't meant the words, Phil knew he would never stop hearing them. And he knew that she meant what she said. As the last remains of his hope evaporated, he wondered where he'd gone wrong.

Staring at the cake as if the frosting held answers, Phil suddenly leaned forward to convince himself that he wasn't hallucinating.

His eyes hadn't deceived him. None of the candles were dripping melted wax. The damned candles weren't burning down at all.

"Look at that will you."

Shellac muttered something, started to stand.

Spitting on two fingers, Phil pinched out a candle. There was no way he was going to be beaten by a birthday cake, not tonight. He would prove one and for all that he was worth loving, that Mary was dead wrong.

He waited. Counted to five.

Shellac opened her mouth.

Phil's fingertips burst into flame.

He leapt to his feet.

The flame crawled over his hand and roared up his arm.

Shellac was screaming, but Phil remained calm, mesmerized by the fire. It didn't hurt. It was gorgeous.

Shellac jammed wrapping paper against the flames that were spreading across Phil's chest, the fire bridging the gap and then Shellac was engulfed.

She ran in a panic and then stopped before she reached the door, turning to face him. "Why can't I feel the fire?"

Phil smiled, seeing a chance for redemption. "Happy birthday honey."

"They aren't even warm." She ran a flame-covered hand over her flame-covered face.

Phil reached for the switch and turned off the lights. He waved his arms and created art in the darkness, yellow and red streamers that dazzled and danced.

"Look honey. Watch what I'm doing."

Shellac paid close attention, and then began mimicking him. She began where he left off.

The buzzer shrieked. Mary's voice crackled out of the speaker, the sounds indistinct.

Shellac developed her own patterns of light and darkness and then taught Phil how to make them.

Someone started banging at the door.

Phil and Shellac performed a duet. They learned from each other, shared their insights and imagination with their performance. With every additional second, their orchestrations grew more skilled.

There was another round of banging. "So help me Phil, if you don't open the door this instant I'm going to call the police."

Closer, Shellac let in her mother and returned to the dance.

Mary shrieked as she stepped into the apartment. After a moment's hesitation, she continued into the living room with a face that was chiseled by the light. "What the fuck is going on here?"

With a whoosh, the flames shot across the room and enveloped her, Mary spinning in horror until she stopped in amazement.

She lifted one arm and then the other, gestured towards her daughter, her ex-husband. “How?”
“It’s Shellac’s birthday present.”

Nodding as if she understood, Mary came forward as the other two stepped aside. Connected by fire, they became a triangle, a circle, a family again.

Phil felt waves of satisfaction warming him. The three of them were together at last, shining brightly in the darkness, creating a thing of beauty.

It wasn’t his birthday, and he hadn’t blown out the candles, but he still got his wish. For the first time in more years than Phil could count, he was happy.

Then the moment ended, and the flames began to burn.