

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH

A MONOLOGUE about ageing

By JANE CAFARELLA

Time: The present. SUE, 60, is talking to her neighbor (unseen) who is turning 40 and has dropped in to borrow some birthday candles. Beside Sue is a folder of papers and a box of birthday candles.

No problem at all! *(She puts the folder aside. I was just catching up on some paperwork.*

(Picking up the box of candles) I keep them in a little box in the back of the pantry. Here you go. (She counts four candles from the box). One for every decade.

Oh, You're a spring chicken! I felt exactly the same way at your age. We all do. I wrote a poem about it. I thought you might like it – a little birthday gift. You wanna hear it? It's kind of a Hallmark alternative.

She reads.

TURNING FORTY CAN BE FUN,
BUT IF YOU GET THE BLUES,
BE THANKFUL YOU'RE NOT FORTY-ONE
- THAT REALLY IS BAD NEWS!

FORTY-ONE'S A NOTHING AGE
THERE'S NOTHING TO COMMEND IT.
YOU'RE JUST A LITTLE CLOSER
TO THE YEAR IN WHICH YOU'LL END IT.

NO ONE GIVES A PARTY.
NO ONE GIVES A FUCK!
YOU'RE JUST A LITTLE OLDER,
AND IT'S JUST YOUR ROTTEN LUCK!

IT'S THE SAME FOR EVER AFTER -
FORTY-TWO, THREE, FOUR AND FIVE.
SO, STOP COUNTING ALL THOSE GREY HAIRS,
AND BE GRATEFUL YOU'RE ALIVE.

SO HAVE A HAPPY BIRTHDAY,
AND DON'T EVEN SHED A TEAR.
BECAUSE TODAY YOU'RE ONLY FORTY
- BUT YOU'RE FORTY-ONE NEXT YEAR!

I'm glad you're laughing. I gave a copy to my brother-in-law when he turned 40. I haven't heard from since. You have to laugh, don't you?

I was 29 when I wrote it. Forty seemed so old! Back then, almost everyone I knew was older than me. They represented the past. I represented the future.

The future came pretty quickly. I wrote another poem when I turned 50. You wanna hear it? *(She takes the poem from the folder.)*

TURNING FIFTY CAN BE FUN
BUT IF YOU'RE FEELING SAD
BE GRATEFUL YOU'RE NOT FIFTY-ONE
THAT'S ALMOST TWICE AS BAD!

FIFTY-ONE'S A ROTTEN AGE
THERE'S NO CAUSE TO DEFEND IT
YOUR BODY STARTS TO FALL APART
AND IT COSTS A MINT TO MEND IT.

NO ONE GIVES A GIVES A PARTY
NO ONE GIVES A STUFF
AND NO ONE WANTS TO JOIN YOU
WHEN YOU'RE SWIMMING IN THE BUFF

AND LOOKING IN THE MIRROR
IS NO LONGER ANY FUN
COZ THE PERSON STARING BACK AT YOU
LOOKS JUST LIKE YOUR MUM!

SO, STOP WISHING YOUR WERE FORTY
AND LIVE YOUR LIFE INSTEAD
DO ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED
BECAUSE TOMORROW YOU'LL BE DEAD!

Beat.

Still here.

It's my birthday today, too. (*She counts out six candles, with satisfaction.*) One for each decade.

A party? No! Just a cake. Julia Child once said a party without a cake is just a meeting. These days I just want the cake.

No presents either. You spend the first 50 years collecting stuff and the next 50 throwing it all out. I'm just going out to lunch with a friend.

No. (*Sadly*) Steve died five years ago. Heart attack. I'll see the kids next weekend. They're so busy.

I wrote another poem. I think you'll like it. (*Shyly*) I'm having my first anthology published next month.

She reads.

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH
I MISS YOU A LITTLE
MY SKIN IS TOO DRY
MY HAIR DULL AND BRITTLE

BUT PLEASE, DON'T FLY BACK TO THE NEST
BECAUSE, I ADMIT
I'M ENJOYING THE REST

NO MORE WORRYING ABOUT HOW I LOOK
NO ONE'S LOOKING

NO MORE WORRYING ABOUT WHAT I SAY
NO ONE'S LISTENING

NO MORE WORRYING ABOUT WHAT I DO
NO ONE CARES

NO CHILDREN TO FEED
NO MAN WITH A NEED

MY BODY IS MINE AGAIN
THERE'S FREEDOM AND TIME AGAIN

SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH
DON'T GET IN A FLAP
BUT I'M NOT TOO KEEN ON INVITING YOU BACK
BECAUSE NOW I CAN FLY

NO ONE TO PULL ME DOWN
PUT ME DOWN
PUSH ME DOWN
I CAN FLY!
I CAN FLY!
SEE ME SOAR, SO HIGH!
SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH
PLEASE PASS ME BY

SEE ME FLY!
SEE ME FLY!
SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH, GOODBYE!

She gathers the three poems and hands them her neighbor.

Happy Birthday!

ENDS

Approx. 700 words