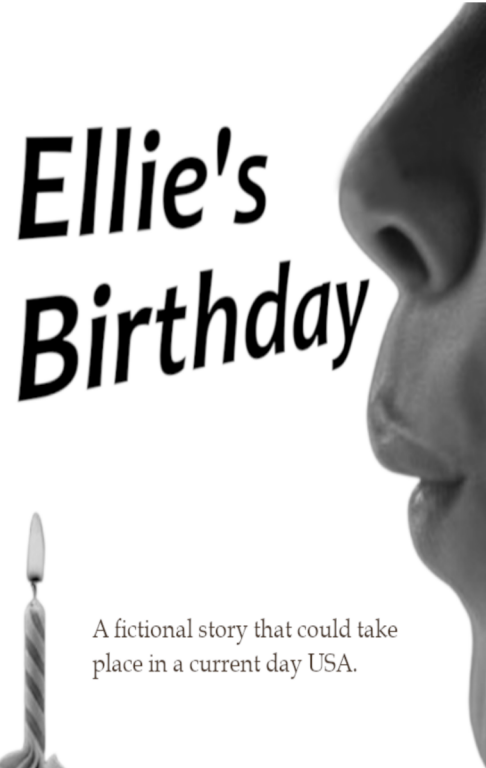
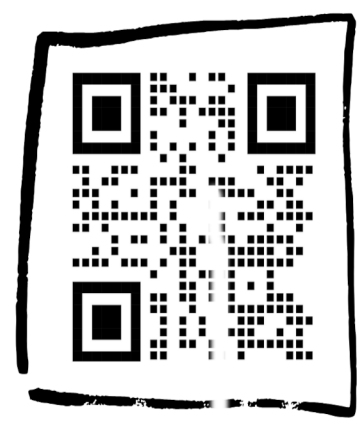




Ellie's Birthday

A fictional story that could take place in a current day USA.

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Is this my life now?
The fairy lights twinkled. No answer came.

We shall see.

She wants to be brave. Sadly, brave people end up on the news with their ages in the headline. Will she make it to thirty-eight? The question isn't about time or health. It's about men in camo vests who wink at after beating someone. She has to sit with this question alone because the people who are supposed to love her are cheering for the men in masks and joining them. That loneliness is its own kind of tunnel, longer and darker than the one under the store.

A final tear traced a hot path down her cheek. She drew a shaky breath and sang, the words a hollow echo in her safe, twinkling room.
"Happy birthday... to me."
She closed her eyes, wished for nothing because no wish felt safe, and blew.
The flame died, a wisp of smoke curling up.
In the sudden, total quiet, from a few blocks away, the whistles started again.

The exit on 16th was another ladder, another grate pushed open into an alley. The evening air felt like a was a breathe of fresh air. In the dimming light, a man stood at the end of the alley holding a little girl no older than three on his hip. They had dark skin and dark hair. The father looked back meeting Ellie's eyes for a fraction of a second—a flash of shared, unspeakable understanding—before he turned, holding his daughter tighter, and hurried away.
Ellie was in her own neighborhood. She ran the last three blocks, tumbled her keys, fell inside, and threw the deadbolt.
Her phone deep inside her purse chimed. She flinched so hard her shoulder hit the door, clutching her purse so hard in an attempt to muffle the sound. Deep breathe. Releasing the bag. Deep Breathe. Wiping her face, her fingers came away wet. The sunglasseses, forgotten, clattered to the floor. She'd been wearing them in the tunnel. No wonder it had been so dark.

"Service tunnel. Left goes to 16th Street. Right to 25th. Pick your direction and just walk. Don't run. It echoes."
"Thank you," she breathed. She set her basket down, the flowers nodding foolishly, and climbed down into the cool, damp air. Her feet found the concrete floor. Before she could turn, the basket came dangling down with a cane device used to bring food to the front of shelves.
"Don't forget your stuff," her voice floated down, hushed. Ellie took the handle.
Above her, the grate slid shut, sealing her in the dark. She was alone, but she could hear the faint scuff of shoes ahead. She wasn't the first to escape this way.
The walk was twenty minutes in a profound, echoing blackness. She focused on the feel of the basket handle in her hand, the faint, sweet smell of the cupcake cutting through the tunnel's musty dampness.

"What the hell is going on?"
The store manager marched out of his office. He went straight to the agent hauling the florist.
"Let her go! She's legal! We verify! And you—you leave Mr. Samuel alone! He's been a customer here since you were in diapers!"
The agent turned. He didn't speak. He just swung a closed fist that connected with the manager's jaw with a wet crack. He dropped like a sack and groaned. He tried to push up, slurred,
"What the f---"
The agent leaned down with his gun flipped around and he brought the heavy grip down on the side of manager's head. Just once and the manager went still.



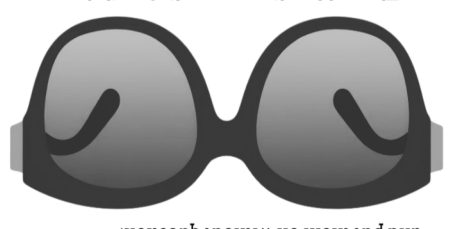
ground.
was supposed to be neutral
against the dread. The grocery store birthday tomorrow. A small defiance chocolate drizzle for her thirty-seventh sweet, marble cupcake with vanilla icing and All she'd wanted was a cupcake. A stupid, with "Patriotic" tears.
he joined. Her parents toasted him proudly year. It's why she moved out not long after the night her brother came home and announced can only pretend so long before the lie starts to wear you out from the inside. She knew it last pretend the world isn't curdling, turning into something sharp and unrecognizable. But you not to care when she hears the news. She She pretends not to be afraid. She pretends chest. She let her tears fall.
the ground, pulling her knees to her leaned her back against it and sank to her closing it harshly behind her. She Ellie rushed through the front door,

She passed a display that blocked her view of the florist and the front door as she made her way to the registers.



She'd gotten the cupcake. She'd even found a single, stubborn birthday candle plunged into a display of cake toppers. Then, while walking to the register, she saw the flowers. Her flowers. Irises and chrysanthemums, the purple and bronze a deep, familiar ache. The florist, a woman with kind lines around her eyes and green gardening gloves, was carefully re-wrapping the bouquet. "The vase had a little accident," she'd said, smiling. They'd talked about the best way to keep irises from drooping. It was a normal, human moment. A tiny thread of connection. Ellie walked away with her cupcake and her discounted, vaseless bouquet, feeling a fragile flicker of something like luck.

She brought a hand to her stinging eyes—the pepper spray was in the air—and he spoke without looking away from his screen. "Don't." His voice was low, calm. He reached to a spinning rack of sunglasses, snatched an oversized pair, and handed them to her wordlessly. She took his hint and put them on without question.



The sudden dim was a relief until she saw the florist. The kind woman with the gardening gloves was being yanked by her arm. "I'm a citizen! I have my card!" she sobbed, tumbling for her wallet. An agent threw her against the wall with a



The whistles started.



Not police whistles. These were cheaper, shriller, the sound of coaches and referees. They sliced through the mundane supermarket hum of elevator music and freezer fans.
When she cleared the display, the world had changed. Men in camo vests stamped with "ICE" stormed the doors. But they weren't in uniform. They wore sweatpants, sneakers, ski masks pulled down or bandannas the casualness terrifying. Like they'd just rolled out of bed to do this. They moved with a focused chaos, going after anyone who had a dark tint to their skin.



"Move!" one barked, giving an aggressive push against a cart as he entered the store. The old woman at the other end of the cart gave a cry as she fell. A teenage boy, in a store uniform, and a young man, a customer, push their carts to hold the masked men back. A moment of bravery, until the guns were raised. Three more carts rattled into the space, thrown from a distance. No one wanted to be close. The distraction was enough to allow the boy to duck behind a display and run. The other wasn't as lucky. He dragged by his collar and thrown to the ground beside the old woman. A can of pepper spray hissed, a sickening cloud, and the man curled into himself, choking.
Ellie stumbled back, her hand basket clutched to her chest, and bumped into someone solid. A man. He wasn't running. He stood planted, his phone held steady, silently recording. Not the people fleeing. He was filming them. The agents. Their badges. Their faces when the masks slipped. He was a witness, a legal observer, cataloging the crime in real time.



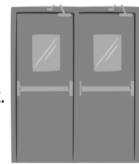
The notification chimed again and she pulled her phone out. Glowing on the screen was Facebook. The last tether to the family she was born into...



Family Chat:
Mom: Happy early birthday, sweetheart! May all good things be happening for you this year!
We miss you!
Brother: Yeah, have a good one, Ellie.
Dad: Thirty-seven! Look at you! All our love!

She placed the phone facedown, the cheerful words were a kind of violence. It hurt more after today. Her gaze fell to the basket. The flowers were ruined. The irises, bent at broken necks, the chrysanthemums, missing petals like lost teeth.
She didn't turn on the overhead light. Her apartment was lit by strings of fairy lights on timers, and they were just beginning to glow, tiny constellations against the walls. She carried the basket to her small table. Is this thing a souvenir, or should I take it back?

She looked at the chaos, at him, at the door. He was right. She was a statue. A target. She moved, her body feeling separate, gliding past overturned displays, through the swinging door marked 'Employees Only.'
The room was cold, concrete, stacked high with pallets of food. There was a counter with clipboards, a window looking out into the store. A head of blond hair, the same shade as her own, popped up from behind it. A young girl, maybe twenty, with wide, frightened eyes that matched the green of hers.
"Car out back or the front lot?" she whispered, urgent.
"Front lot," she whispered back.
"That way is unsafe. You'll have to get your car later. Follow me."



"Then the agent straightened. He scanned the wreckage of his making—the crying woman, the unconscious man, the scattered food. His gaze landed on Ellie, standing there in her stupid sunglasseses, her basket of birthday treats. He couldn't see her eyes. But he must have seen her frozen horror. **HE WINKED**." The skin around his own eyes, the only part visible above his bandanna, crinkled. A smile. He was smiling. Then he turned and kicked a spilled can of peas, sending it clattering, as he walked to his next task.
A sound escaped Ellie's throat, a whisper Seven people. She'd counted. Seven people in zip-tie cuffs, being dragged toward the doors like sacks. The legal observer's hand landed on her shoulder. It was warm and steady, an anchor in the storm.
"People are leaving that way," He said as he pointed, his voice still that calm, focused murmur. "Go. You don't need to be here."