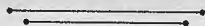


## THE BIRTHDAY OF A FAILED REVOLUTIONARY



Once there was a rich man. A very rich man. Too rich, some said. Many years ago he invented something or stole someone else's invention. It was so long ago that he himself couldn't remember anymore. But his invention was sold to a huge conglomerate for a lot of money, and the man invested all the money in land and water. On the land he bought, he built lots of tiny concrete cubicles, which he sold to people who were hungry for walls and a roof, and he poured the water into bottles and sold them to people who were thirsty. When he finished selling everything at exorbitant prices, he went back to his enormous, beautiful home and thought about what to do with all the money he'd made. Of course, he could have thought about what he'd do with his life, a question no less interesting, but people with that much money are usually too busy to find time for that kind of thinking.

The rich man sat in his huge house and tried to think of more things he could buy for small change and sell for big money, and also about other things that might make him happy. He was lonely and very much in need of things that could make him happy. He wasn't lonely because he wasn't a nice guy. He was a very nice guy, and very popular, too, and lots of people sought out his company. But since he was also sensitive and suspicious, he thought people only wanted to be with him because of his money. And so he chose to stay away from everyone.

The truth is that the man was right. All the people around him, except for one, did like him, but they also sought him out because of the money. They didn't have enough, or they thought they didn't have enough, and at the same time, they thought he had too much. All the people around him (except for one) believed that if he gave them a little bit of his money, he wouldn't miss it, and their lives would improve drastically. And it was that one person who didn't take the slightest interest in the rich man's money and the future it could buy for him who committed suicide.

The rich man lay on his white marble living room floor, feeling sorry for himself. It was a pleasant spring day and the marble floor cooled his body, but this did nothing to keep him from feeling sorry for himself. The man thought, "There must be something in the world that I want, that could make me happy. Something another person might have to spend his whole life trying to acquire but that I could buy without any

effort." But nothing came to mind. He had been lying on the floor for four entire days when his cell phone rang. His mother was on the other end, calling to wish him a happy birthday. She was very old and had so few memory cells left in her brain that she could only store the names of her close relatives and a few important dates. The rich man was glad to hear her voice, and just as their conversation ended, the doorbell rang. Standing in the doorway was a delivery boy wearing a motorcycle helmet, holding a bouquet of fragrant flowers with a birthday card attached. Though the person who had sent him the flowers was not at all nice, the flowers themselves were lovely and they made the man even happier. All that happiness triggered an entrepreneurial thought in the man's mind: If a birthday causes such joy, then why settle for only one a year?

The man decided to put a large ad in the paper offering to buy people's birthdays. Of course, not the actual birthday, which can't really be bought, but everything that comes along with it: presents, greetings, parties, etc. The response was amazing. Maybe it was because of the economic depression at the time, or the fact that people didn't think their birthdays were very important or worth very much, but whatever the reason, in less than a week, the rich man found that his diary was almost completely full with scheduled birthdays.

Most birthday sellers were honest. Except for one elderly man who tried secretly to save for himself a few wet kisses and an ugly painting his grandchildren gave him, all the other sellers followed the contract to the letter and sent the rich man all

the profits from their birthday without having to be threatened or sued.

And so, the rich man received many friendly calls every day wishing him happiness, and all sorts of children and old women he didn't know sang "Happy Birthday to You" to him over the phone. His e-mail box was always full of birthday greetings, and gift-wrapped presents arrived at his home nonstop. He still had a few holes in his schedule, especially around February, but his people showed him an endless number of Excel charts explaining that it was only a matter of time before those empty dates were filled.

The rich man was happy. One newspaper published an op-ed piece by some bleeding heart who objected to the rich man's purchase of birthdays, calling it unethical, but even that couldn't ruin his great mood. On that day, he celebrated an eighteen-year-old girl's birthday, and all the heartwarming notes from her best friends made him feel that he had an unknown, exciting future before him.

That wonderful time ended on March 1. The rich man was scheduled to celebrate the birthday of an angry widower, but when he woke up that morning, he discovered that he hadn't received a single card or phone call, and felt slightly cheated. Being such a resourceful man, he decided not to let it get him down, but to do something different. The rich man looked at his calendar again and saw that March 1 was the anniversary of the date the only man who didn't want anything from him had committed suicide, and he decided to go to the cemetery. When

he reached the grave of his dead friend, he saw that many other people had come to the annual memorial service. They cried and put red flowers on the grave. They hugged one another and talked about how much they missed the man whose death had left a hole in their lives.

The rich man thought, "Maybe there's something here. Dead people can't enjoy all the love showered on them, but I can. Maybe I can buy the anniversary of people's death, too? Not from the people themselves, of course, but from their heirs. That way I can place a bed covered with dark, one-way glass on the grave, lie inside it, and hear people cry and say how much they miss me."

It was an interesting idea, but the rich man didn't live to act on it. He died the next morning, and like many of the events he had recently celebrated, his death was also meant for someone else. His body was found among the torn wrappings of presents he'd received for a birthday he'd purchased from a failed revolutionary. Later, it was discovered that one of the presents had been booby-trapped and sent by a ruthless, tyrannical regime.

Thousands attended the rich man's funeral. All the mourners wanted his money, but they also liked him very much. They eulogized him for hours, sang sad songs, and placed small stones on the open grave. It was so moving that even the young Chinese billionaire who had bought the rights to the funeral from the dead man's legal heirs and watched it all from his dark cubicle at the bottom of the grave shed a tear.