

Stella's Ninetieth Birthday  
by Gary Corbin

Time passes slowly sometimes when you're on vacation, particularly when it's raining hard, you've been visiting family for four days, and have largely run out of things to do.

"We're going to Dick and Caroline's at two for her mom's ninetieth birthday party," my Mom says to me around 1:30. "Want to come?"

Let's see, a birthday party in a small New England town for someone twice my age, whom I've never met, on a rainy Saturday in October. Sounds compelling. Wait, am I properly dressed? Perhaps I'd better shave first. Change into my dancing shoes.

"Sure," I say. Fact is, I'm 3000 miles from home and I have nothing better to do. I'm here to see my parents. They're going. End of story.

My mother tucks a brightly-wrapped present under her arm. "Stella *loves* Cadbury chocolate," Mom says. Sure she does. So do I. Hey, my birthday's coming up.

This being my parents, we're five minutes early. Only one other couple is there, not counting Stella and our hosts. But then guests begin pouring in, two at a time. Aside from me and the guest of honor, who is twice my age, all of the other guests are in their seventies. In a matter of minutes I'm surrounded by a sea of white hair and Medicare. I smile politely as I've been taught to do and make small talk; one of the youngest kids in a large family, with literally dozens of aunts and uncles and older cousins on each side, I'm good at this. What can I say? It's a skill. I never could draw, hit a baseball or sing worth a darn, but I can chat up old people like nobody's business.

As the room fills, our hosts squeeze a seemingly endless supply of folding chairs

between seated Depression-era couples. Finally, someone of my generation appears: Tom, Caroline and Dick's oldest son, and his wife, whose name I do not catch. We are all in our forties, so it is assumed that we know each other. I do know Tom from childhood but haven't seen him in over twenty years. He is seated across from his wife, who is next to Tom's grandmother. They are all introduced. Apparently Stella's memory is not what it used to be. This is reinforced when another couple tells Caroline that they let it slip about Stella's surprise party the following weekend. "Don't worry," Caroline says, standing next to her mother, "she won't remember."

I am at the far end of the room, a few chairs from my Dad, too far to be able to talk to him, to Tom, or to my Mom, who is seated at the opposite end of the living room with all the other Golden Girls. They joke that it's like high school again. I keep wondering which of them will ask me to dance.

The man next to me – I think his name is Les – has asked me a question. "So is your Dad playing golf?"

I cast an obvious glance over at my Dad, just six feet from Les, then out the window at the torrential downpour. It's loud, almost drowning out the conversation in the room. I look back at Les, at his wet shoulders, and nod at my Dad. "I don't think so. Not today, anyway." Les smiles and sips his punch. He's happy. He's made party small talk to the stranger to his left, as his wife no doubt has instructed him at countless dinner parties before. No one can say he didn't. He turns to the man next to him, a man he knows, and makes a comment about the Red Sox. I tell him my brother and I were at last night's game.

"In the rain?"

Well, no. Last night, in Fenway, see, it didn't rain. So they went ahead and played the game.

"Maybe they shouldn't have." Maybe so; the Red Sox lost. Clearly, though, I've violated party etiquette. He's done his job. This extra conversation, it's stressful. We don't need extra stress here. I can almost hear the pacemakers ticking.