

Turning 10

by Dusty Taylor

Katie preheated the oven and bent over to pull a cake pan out of the adjacent cabinet. She pushed a bouquet of balloons sitting in the middle of the counter into the corner and turned to address her daughter. "Anna, I have something for you that I think you're going to love."

"A birthday present?" Anna struggled to contain her excitement. She jumped up and onto a stool by the island in the middle of the kitchen and waited for her surprise.

"Sorta," Katie cleared some candles and wrapped gifts on the large countertop that connected her to her daughter. In their place she added a huge bowl, a whisk and a box of cake mix.

"Before I give it to you, let me ask you something.

"OK. What is it?" Katie shot back.

"What do you remember about your dad?"

Anna thought for a second. "I remember when we went to the water park together. Dad went on the big slides with me because you were such a wuss!"

Katie laughed. "I just didn't want to get in the way of all the fun you and your dad were having."

"Oh, I'm sure that was it," Anna replied sarcastically. "I also remember sitting next to dad in church. He would draw pictures on the program while the pastor preached. I miss that a lot. And of course I remember the hospital, him laying there with all those tubes and grandma and grandpa staying with us to help out."

Katie pulled some milk out of the fridge and sat it next to the mixing bowl. "Well, before he died, he recorded something for you and asked me to give it to you when you turned 10."

The smile slowly eroded from Anna's face. "Really? A message from dad?"

Katie continued, "Yes, it's about 10 minutes long. Let me get this cake in the oven and we can watch it together."

Anna sat there quietly staring at the grains in the granite while her mom cracked eggs and whisked everything together. After 3 or so minutes of contemplation, Anna asked, "Maybe we should wait until after my party. I'm just not sure what that is going to do to me."

"It's going to be great! Seriously, great. You will be so glad you watched it. I promise."

"Have you seen it?" Anna asked.

"Some of it, years ago when he filmed it. I'm actually a little nervous about watching it too, but I promised him I wouldn't watch the finished video until you turned 10. I almost caved a few times, but I held out. We can laugh through it together!"

Katie poured the batter into the cake pan and slid it into the oven.

"Alright, are you ready?"

The two ladies made their way into the living room. Anna sat on the couch across from the TV, picked up the remote and pushed the power button. Katie opened a small cabinet in the TV stand and pulled out a black case made to hold DVD's. Anna had never noticed it before. She watched as her mom unzipped it and extracted the first disc. It had a huge number 10 written on it with black magic marker. As Katie closed the case Anna saw what she thought was another disc with a large number 13.

"OK, here we go!" Katie slid the disc into the player and after a few seconds of loading the screen came to life."

"Hi honey! Happy Birthday. I can't believe you're 10 years old!" The man on the screen was smiling. He had all his hair and his skin looked darker than either of them had remembered.

"He must have recorded this before he got sick?" Anna asked.

"Right after the doctors diagnosed him," Katie confirmed, "He wanted to do it while he still had the energy."

"Alright! I am standing here outside an elementary school, if you and mom don't move, this might be where you'll be attending. I've already spoken with the teachers to make sure they'll be good for you and it's safe to say they are going to love you!"

It was so surreal for Anna to see her father again. His mannerisms, the inflections in his voice, she remembered a lot more about him than she thought she did.

Anna's dad continued, "I spent about 2 hours this morning, trying to picture who you would be when you turned 10. Here, look at this." He held a phone up to the camera. And swiped through 3 or 4 pictures of him at a coffee shop.

"This is me thinking about you at the age of 10" He said as he swiped through the pictures. In one picture he had his eyes closed and his brow furled. His lips were smashed together so tightly you could barely see them. In another picture he had his left hand on his chin with this first finger on his nose. His right hand arm, clearly visible on the edge of the shot was holding the camera as far back as it could. They smiled at his goofiness.

In the third picture he had an entire muffin sticking out of his face with both hands around his neck! Both ladies laughed out loud.

"He had to get someone else to take that picture!" Anna laughed. "I can just hear him saying, 'will you take my picture while I pretend to be choking.'"

The fourth picture was a stranger hugging Anna's dad from behind giving him the Heimlich maneuver. Katie laughed so hard she had to cross her legs. "I wondered how he got that guy to do that," she sputtered between laughs.

Anna's father continued, "Needless to say it's been an interesting morning Anna!"

The sound of hearing her name being said with her father's voice instantly put tears in her eyes. She was still laughing but something deep inside her was being stirred, healed maybe. She reached over and took her mom's hand. "I miss him."

"Well, I survived the attack of the muffin so I decided to come here to figure out what you might be like when you're ten." In the background, behind her father, was a playground full of elementary kids. "Come on in." He took one step toward the camera and picked it up off the tripod.

"Where's he going?" Anna asked.

"I don't know," Katie answered honestly, "This is part I wasn't allowed to watch."

He took the camera and walked toward the large front doors. He talked as he made his way up the elementary sidewalk. "I enlisted the help of a 5th grade class. I thought if I could figure out what 5th graders are like, I might get an idea of what you are like. Makes sense in my head anyway." He raised his eyebrows and flattened his smile.

The video cut to a room full of 5th graders. They were all sitting in their desks, some had their hands in their laps, others on their desks. A few of them fidgeted. At the front of the class was Anna's current 5th grade teacher. Anna put her hands on her mouth. "That's Mrs. Williams!"

Katie smiled at the brilliance of her late husband and shook her head. "He still surprises me."

Mrs Williams addressed the class. "Class, we have a special guest today. He's a friend of mine and he's doing a survey and needs our help. Do you think we could help him out?"

"YES!" The class responded.

"OK, let's remember the rules, raise your hand to answer a question and make sure you answer succinctly and with respect."

"She still says that!" Anna blurted, her eyes still glued to the TV.

Mrs. Williams sat down at her desk in the corner of the room, she was barely visible on the corner of the screen. Anna's father walked up the middle aisle and stood in front a large dry- erase board.

"I was wondering if you guys could help me with a huuuuuuuuge project, but I need you to use your imagination! Can you do that?"

"Yeah!!!" The class shouted back, even louder than they did for their teacher.

"I need to know what 10 year olds are really like. Can some one tell me what your favorite thing to do is?"

A boy in the front row raised his hand. "I really like to play sports and go skating." "Great!" Anna's dad said.

A girl in the second row went next, "I've started learning how to take pictures with my dad's camera. Next I'm going to learn how edit them on a computer."

"Wow! That's really amazing! You know what . . . I took some photographs this morning at a coffee shop. They turned out really great." He looked through the camera and into the living room at his 2 girls. It was a little inside joke that spanned the breadth of 6 years. "Anyone else?"

"I read books!"

"I like drawing pictures."

"I love playing video games!"

"Those are great answers!" The dad congratulated the group. "Let me ask all the girls something, do you ladies like hanging around with boys?"

"No!" All the girls shouted in soprano unison.

"Oh good!" The dad replied. I'm really glad to hear that!" Well, I have a daughter and her name is Anna. She is an amazing little lady and she is turning 10 years old. Unfortunately I don't get to go to her birthday party but I bought this amazing cake for her and I was wondering if you guys wouldn't mind helping me celebrate her birthday. Would you guys like some cake?"

"YEAH!" the class screamed.

"OK, I'm going to grab my camera in the back of the room and if you guys will sing happy birthday to Anna, I will send her the video. And everyone can blow out the candles. Deal?"

Katie noticed Mrs. Williams sitting in the corner wiping her eyes. It was obvious she knew the situation.

The video showed all the kids hovering around the birthday cake. In pink icing on the top it read, "Happy Birthday Anna." The 10 candles were lit and the kids began to sing happy birthday. About halfway through the song Anna's dad held the camera out at arms length. With him in the foreground and all the kids behind him, he sang happy birthday to his daughter, "Happy birthday dear ANNA . . ." He shouted her name super loud and then turned the camera back onto the class. They finished the song and everyone blew out the candles.

The next few shots were all short edited clips. Shots the cake being cut. Shots of kids laughing and eating. A shot of Mrs. Williams saying, "Happy Birthday Anna!" A shot of a few kids saying thanks for the cake. A shot of Anna's dad on one knee talking to a couple of students. A final shot of him hugging Mrs. Williams and saying "Thank-you."

The screen faded to black and the two ladies sat there without words. Katie let go of Anna's hand and put it around her daughter. "Pretty great dad, huh?"

Anna wiped her eyes with her sleeves. "Wow . . . Did he leave you any videos?" Anna was curious.

"Nope," Katie replied, "not a one. But, he left me hundreds of emails. One shows up in my in box two or three times a month. I have no idea how your dad set that up before he died, but it always brightens my day."

The alarm on the stove went off and just as Katie stood to head into the kitchen the screen came back to life.

"You guys aren't crying are you?" He was so close to the camera that you could only see his eyes and nose. "Seriously . . . it's a birthday celebration. Don't be such wusses." He shook his head and rolled his eyes at the camera. "One last thing," he backed up so they could see his entire face. "I love you Anna! It took some imagination today, but I see you! I can picture exactly who you are. A beautiful mini version of your momma. I'm so very proud of who you are." Anna's dad smiled as big as possible, mostly to hold back his own tears and waved goodbye."

"Can I watch it again?" Anna asked.

"For sure, but after the party. Right now, you can help me clean up all the cake making remnants.

"Definitely. Thanks mom. That was pretty amazing."

After the party was over and the last guest left, Anna walked over to the TV, opened the cabinet and pulled out the CD case. Sure enough it was full of DVD's. 13, 16, 18, 21, marriage, kids #1, kid #2, it was a timeline of the life she had waiting for her. And at each milestone her father would be there to give some support, make her cry and remind her how much she is cherished.

She closed the case and slid it back into its home. She pulled the disc labeled 10 out of the player and took it with her up to her room. She would laugh at their new inside joke one more time before she headed for bed.

Up the stairs and down the hallway she passed in front of her mom's room. "Anna!" Her mom shouted. "Come see this."

As Anna entered the room her mom held out a tablet in front of Anna.
"What is it?" Asked Anna.

"Another email from your father."

"Can I read it?" Anna asked.

"Nope." Katie replied.

"Then why are you showing it to me?" "Look what's at the bottom."

Katie leaned in and looked at the bottom of the email. There,
underlined in blue was a video link.

Anna erupted! "It's another video! You got to let me watch!"

Katie replied, "Maybe, but me first. I'll tell you about it in the morning!"

The two ladies hugged each other and Anna headed out of the room.

Katie yelled down the hallway, "Breakfast in the morning? Coffee
shop?"

Anna turned and stuck her head back into the master bedroom, "Sure
ma, we can split a muffin."