Happy Birthday

My sister calls today. The phone rings on the little side table beside the couch, and we know it’s her because it’s been this time, every week since she’s run away with Tyler. To their little liberal arts college somewhere out there, not New York. The ringing blends in nicely with the sound of the coffee machine whirring noisily in the kitchen. My mother’s washing breakfast plates in the kitchen. It’s just me, her, and my dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts now. We are a happy family. I think.

The coffee machine stops whirring and lets out a long beep. It means it’s done. The phone stops ringing. We’re left with the sound of water running in the kitchen sink, and I can imagine my mother pretending that the phone’s never rung.

“Allie called today,” I call back, like usual.

“Uh-huh,” she says, voice raised over the sound of the water splashing against plates, like usual.

“She left a voicemail,” I tell her, like usual.

My mother doesn’t respond. Like usual. And I don’t tell my dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts because he doesn’t care. I wouldn’t know, really.

I’ll listen to the voicemail later, when she goes to work. Like usual. My mother takes a sip of her morning coffee, hissing from the heat afterwards.

“Want some?” she says from the kitchen. I look at her from my position on the couch.

“Uh-uh,” I say. “No coffee for me today.” I know that my mother shrugs and is blowing on her coffee to cool it. I remember when my dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts used to tell her to put ice in it. He believes in iced coffee. Believed. Believes. I wouldn’t know.
My mother sets her coffee mug in the sink—clang plop. Unfinished, like everything she does. It’s my job to wash the mugs today. My mother never finishes her coffee and only takes sips to remind her that she is alive.

“Okay, I’m going to work now. Don’t break anything.” I hear the clickety-clack of her boots, swoosh of her coat, the door creaking open. I know she’s gone so I stand up and shuffle towards the door, and push it shut. I wash my mother’s mug in the sink.

Today’s a Saturday and I’ve decided I have a full checklist of my to-dos:

1. Count the tiles you step on going toward your bedroom.
2. Count stains on every T-shirt in your closet three times.
3. Count the number of tiles in the bathroom before taking a shower.
4. Voicemail.
5. Call Allie back.
6. Count the number of little holes there are on the couch.
7. Mother gets home, stop counting.

I put my feet in the tiles just the right way so that my toes don’t touch the lines. It takes thirty-six tiles to get to my bedroom. My dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts used to laugh about what a crazy and anxious little girl I was. I still remember: boisterous laughter on long winter walks.

I progress well on the shirt stains because I have done this before (67 times). I do it two more times. The shirts smell like fresh hardwood floors and a campfire, s’mores on a cold night. My list has seven items, which is a prime number, which is good, but at the same time I want them evened out. My skin prickles. All I want is an odd, even, odd, even, odd, even, number but
instead I have to choose one. On the way to the bathroom, I don’t touch a single one of the lines in between the tiles (56). No mistakes.

The highlight of my day is the voicemail. I tread carefully and sit in my spot nearest to the phone. YOU HAVE A VOICEMAIL, reads the screen. I lift the receiver and nestle it between my ear and shoulder. I press play.

“Hey sis, hey mom,” Allie’s voice filters over the sound of static. “So, uh, I know we haven’t spoken in awhile.” Allie knows that my mother can’t know we’ve been talking. She never listens to the voicemails, anyway, but we can never be too safe. “I’m coming to visit, though, because it’s dad’s birthday.” Right. My dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts turns fifty this year. “And, um, I kinda need a place to stay.” Her voice goes up at the end, like a question. Like, can I please stay?

She knows the answer is no, but I get it. We’ve got to keep trying. Sometimes, I imagine this: my mother knowing I listen to the voicemails. She doesn’t mention it, but it hangs over our Chinese takeout and pizza dinners on nights when she comes home. I shudder.

Later, I fall asleep to Allie’s voice, wishing I could run away, too, but I wouldn’t make it. I can’t live without counting the tiles, and I need to make my mother understand that Allie had to run away.

I sit up in the kind of time that feels slow-moving and hazy, like Jello. I vaguely remember the fifth item on my list, but since sleeping and counting is all I ever do anyway, I lie back down and close my eyes.

The next morning, I make coffee. I sit in my dad’s chair and sip it silently. I don’t hiss. My mother didn’t come home last night; she never tells me why. She comes home smelling like someone else’s cologne so she can forget. I wait for the knock, open the door and step out into
the snow. It hurts my eyes but I look up, and squeeze my sister’s hand. There’s no time for hugs. It’s time to visit my dad who lives on the other side of town, who I never see, but still counts, who will always count.

WELCOME TO GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY.

The coffee mug slips momentarily and I can feel the scalding brown liquid burn the skin on my fingers.

“Happy Birthday,” I breathe. This day is for me, my dad, my sister. We can share it with my mother, who chooses to forget. We are a happy family.