

Front Porch: Gather ye Chuck E. Cheese tokens while ye may

Cindy Hval/SR

The flashing lights of the miniature fire engine temporarily blinded me, and the shriek of the siren enthusiastically blasted by chubby toddler hands deafened me.

My hearing wasn't totally lost because I could still hear the wails of the preschooler who had my leg in a death grip. He'd buried his pizza-smeared face in my thigh, terrorized by the sight of the giant rodent who'd offered him a high-five.

I tried to comfort him, but his baby brother perched precariously on my hip, while his older brother swung from my arm as he tried to snatch more tokens from the plastic cup I held aloft.

The tot on the fire truck pointed and hollered, "Thee's thuck!"

Mercifully, the ride slowed to a stop as I leaned in to better hear him.

He switched his lollipop to his other cheek and made no attempt to stop the copious purple drool pouring down his chin as he said again, "Thee's thuck!"

This time, he pointed to the webbing of tunnels overhead.

I scanned the area, and sure enough, there was the party guest's younger sister, face plastered against the green plastic window, her mouth etched in a frightening grimace that mimicked Edvard Munch's famed painting, "The Scream."

I closed my eyes and made a wish. "Never again," I mumbled. "I never want to spend another birthday at Chuck E. Cheese."

Scanning the crowded room, I spotted Derek digging a toddler out of the ball pit.

"You're gonna have to make a tunnel rescue," I said to my 6-foot-2, 220 pound husband.

He shook his head. "I'm not going up there."

I shifted Zack to my other hip.

"I'm not going up there either, but Brett's sister is stuck and she's blocking traffic."

Stalemate.

Derek glanced up at the girl's terrified face.

"I'm going to be unavailable for the next 10 birthday parties," he said, setting off to dislodge the hysterical tot.

See, this is the kind of thing no one tells you will happen after you have children. Oh, you know there will be birthday celebrations. You've seen the photos of cake-covered faces. You've watched the videos of kids squealing over their first bikes while riding unsteadily off into the sunset.

That's wonderful, you think. That's what I want. Sign me up.

And then comes the magical day of birth. You hold that child in your arms, and though you never forget the agony of the past few hours, it fades away, cloaked in a gauzy haze of love.

What you don't know is that every birthday from here on out is going to be considerably less beautiful and exponentially louder.

With four sons, I've lost count of the number of Chuck E. Cheese, Wonderland, Laser Quest and bowling birthday parties we've hosted. For years, I insisted on home birthday bashes, which involved traditional games like pin the tail on the donkey and musical chairs. Those were the kind of birthday parties I attended as a kid. However, hot potato cannot compete with the electric mayhem of video games and fire trucks with lights and sirens.

It was all so bewildering to me. After all, like most of my peers, I had parties only on special birthdays, like 10, 13 and 16. I tried to take a stand against the excess, but that was really hard to do when the boys' friends had such lavish celebrations.

As my sons grew into their teens, I was relieved to discover the birthday shenanigans shrank to more manageable levels. It appeared that my wish to stop the birthday madness had been granted.

I thought about that a lot as my son's 24th birthday came and went. It was his third birthday in a row that we had spent apart. Texting him in Texas is a poor substitute for kisses, hugs and gazing into his beautiful blue eyes while he eats his favorite birthday treat, my homemade apple pie.

This is also something no one tells you when you have kids – the chaotic celebratory mess won't last forever.

In the midst of missing my son, I thought of so many mothers I know who grieve when their child's birthday comes around. They grieve because their child has died or they're estranged from them, and celebrating birthdays together is no longer an option.

It put my sadness in perspective.

Honestly, I don't miss those Chuck E. Cheese birthday bashes. Not one little bit. I just wish I'd embraced the celebrations more fully and understood how quickly the seasons would pass.

And now, I'm much more careful what I wish for.

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