

# ELEVEN

by Sandra Cisneros



1           What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell  
2 you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and  
3 seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when  
4 you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you  
5 don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's  
6 today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you  
7 are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

8           Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of  
9 you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your  
10 mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five.  
11 And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry  
12 like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad  
13 and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

14           Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings  
15 inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other,  
16 each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

17           You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks  
18 even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you.  
19 And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the  
20 way it is.

21           Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like  
22 pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two  
23 instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known  
24 what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've  
25 known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that  
26 look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

27           "Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in  
28 the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a  
29 month." "Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

30           "It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody  
31 can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar  
32 and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's  
33 maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say  
34 so.

35           Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that  
36 stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like  
37 that all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the  
38 sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing  
39 comes out.

40  
41           "That's not, I don't, you're not...Not mine." I finally say in a little voice  
42 that was maybe me when I was four.

43           “Of course it's yours, ”Mrs. Price says. “ I remember you wearing it  
44 once.” Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

45           Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page  
46 thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a  
47 sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to  
48 come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my  
49 teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven.

50           Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes  
51 home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

52           But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red  
53 sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to  
54 the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser  
55 as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine,  
56 not mine, not mine. In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how  
57 long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence,  
58 or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and  
59 toss it in the alley.

60           Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of  
61 everybody, “Now, Rachel, that's enough, ”because she sees I've shoved  
62 the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over  
63 the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

64 "Rachel, "Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad. "You put  
65 that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

66 "But it's not –"

67 "Now!" Mrs. Price says.

68 This is when I wish I wasn't eleven because all the years inside of me—  
69 ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at  
70 the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater  
71 that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other  
72 and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does,  
73 all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

74 That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since  
75 when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a  
76 sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm  
77 eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of  
78 everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid  
79 clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth  
80 because I can't stop the little animal noises from coming out of me until  
81 there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like  
82 when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink  
83 milk too fast.

84 But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid  
85 Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers  
86 the red sweater is hers. I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs.  
87 Price pretends like everything's okay.

88           Today I'm eleven. There's a cake Mama's making for tonight and  
89 when Papa comes home from work we'll eat it. There'll be candles and  
90 presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you,  
91 Rachel, only it's too late.

92           I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four,  
93 three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was  
94 anything but eleven. Because I want today to be far away already, far  
95 away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to  
96 close your eyes to see it.