

Celebration

A waxy smell hung in the air and smoke from his birthday candles was still curling toward the ceiling when he made his announcement. His father stared at him in silence.

“Oh, JJ,” said his mother, “don’t spoil your party with another argument. You can’t give up work. We need the money. It’s far more important for Eileen to get her degree than for you to go traipsing around Australia. Stop being so selfish.”

“I’ve been working my butt off since I was sixteen to put her through university,” JJ replied, stabbing the serving knife into his cake. And she’s still *at* university. What about me? Now I’m 21 I don’t have to stay here doing what you tell me anymore. She can get her own job if she wants a degree.”

“She’s already working all the hours God sends to finish medical school. You wouldn’t understand because you never stick to anything. But somehow you can hold down a job and that’s your part in this family: to support your sister, who is trying to make something of herself. Unlike you, she wants to help other people.”

“Well, she can start by helping me. I’ve done my bit. While she’s swanning around UCLA doing who knows what, I’m earning the bucks. She’s just sponging off you and Dad and me and everybody. Who ever heard of going to school for seven years when you don’t have to?”

“You said you don’t want an argument and there’s not going to be one. I’m not asking your permission, I’m telling you. I’m leaving. In two weeks.”

“We’ll talk about it later, JJ. Look, here’s a card from Eileen. Open it.”

Happy birthday bro. 21 - Congrats! Take \$10 out of your next check and have a drink on me. Love, E.