

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

Eddie stared at the invitation. The way you stare at words so that they become fuzzy and you are possessed with the feeling that you can change them, their structure, their letter combinations, their meanings. The names, Eddie and Jed, would actually become just Eddie. The date Saturday 27 April would become Friday 26 April and the letters RSVP would really say *I'd love to see you there, love Josh*. Okay. Maybe that last one was a stretch, but you get the idea. Really, Jed too? She scratched her head so hard she drew blood and poked the invitation deep into her handbag.

The morning stretched out and the invitation festered in her mind and her bag. The more she thought about it the more her stomach burned with humiliation. And that in turn made her veins fizz with anger and that meant her skin itched with shame. She knew she should tell him.

Jed was walking around the living room. It was his daily exercise regime. He did twenty seven laps of the room followed by twenty seven push ups, twenty seven sit ups, twenty seven lunges on each leg, then he took a walk back to his bedroom; apparently it took twenty seven long strides to reach, he took the dumbbells from underneath his bed and proceeded to do twenty seven bicep curls. The routine took him twenty seven minutes. It was no use interrupting. It would have been like trying to get Michael Jackson not to grab his crotch when performing a dance routine. Eddie just watched him.

His white blond hair was close cropped and untouched by product. He liked it clipped every four weeks – probably twenty seven days if she thought

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

about it and he wore a grey jogging suit. If only he wore this suit in the outside world. At least he'd look like most of the other shoppers at the local plaza. She also knew it was great that he kept in good shape. He cared little for junk food, save for a chocolate thick shake that he indulged his fancy for every month. When he went for a haircut. Fortuitously, the barber was next to the ice creamery.

“Fate,” she'd said once, when she'd taken him on his monthly trip.

“Oh no,” he'd said. “Fate is a product of the human psyche and is most often used when an unforeseen circumstance has upset a routinely scheduled event. It's a convenience but has no bearing on whether a retail outlet that sells frozen confectionery is positioned next to an outlet that offers men's hairdressing services. That's down to centre management, the rental market and pure chance.”

She smiled tightly and watched her brother take a seat in the barber's chair, glad that the shop was small and shadowed and welcomed a clientele used to silence rather than the chatty ambience of a regular hairdresser.

Her phone rang. It was Sassy. “Hey, how are ya?”

“Yeah good, got Josh's invite? We on for a mammoth night or what?”

It could not be a mammoth night with her brother tagging along. Sassy wouldn't agree. She had always been sensitive to Jed's quirks and she was an earth mother who saw the good and positive in everything and everybody. There

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

was no way Edie could get away without telling her he'd been invited. And there was no way she could tell her that he was invited. Not yet anyway.

"Is Jed coming to the party? Josh said he was going to invite him."

Edie froze. Jed had appeared beside her arms folded in front of him.

Defensive and quizzical. It wasn't looking good.

"Maybe," was all she could utter.

"You haven't asked him," Sassy said, frighteningly perceptive. "You have to, you know."

Again with the fizzing and burning and itching.

So here it was. Tell him and have him accept with sheer joy because, frankly, who really invited Jed to parties. Tell him and have him accept with trepidation and then pester her for the remaining days until the party whereupon he would either a) go and be a complete and utter bore, dragging around behind her all night so that a night at home watching documentaries on the pygmy tribes of Papua would seem a highlight or b) refuse point blank to go and they'd both end up watching said documentaries, after which he'd give her a detailed account of the program they'd sat through including the adverts in between. Or the third option, on which she was pinning her highest hopes, he'd decline the invitation citing differences in tastes such as music, dress, acquaintances and food.

Sassy said she'd call her back. She added that if he said he wanted to go Edie must let him, no questions.

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

She turned to face her brother. “We’ve been invited to a party. For Josh’s 21st. It’s on the 27th. Do you want to come?” There was no point beating around the bush. If she asked something like ‘want do you reckon?’ he’d arch an eyebrow and reply with ‘are you asking if I believe that we’ve both been invited or do you want me to describe my feelings in regards to being invited alongside you?’. She had learnt a long time back to shape her questions directly.

“As it falls on such a salubrious date, I’d be delighted. What is the dress code?”

“It’s no Prom,” she said trying to keep her voice even. “And you can’t wear that. Grey jogging pants are definitely a no-no for an 21st.”

“I realise this party is not a formal occasion, however, there is a usual social convention surrounding the standard of attire required at parties that celebrate milestone events such as birthdays, engagements, weddings and such.” He drew in a breath that signified an impending question. “Would you help me with my outfit?”

Eddie clenched her fists. That could only mean one thing. “Jed,” she started as gently as possible. “It’s not a dress up party. Do you understand?”

Years ago he’d taken to wearing a superman outfit to all parties he was invited to. When you were in the lower grades of primary school that was acceptable. Cute even. But when he was still wearing red jocks on the outside of blue pants and attaching his red cape with a certain jaunty sense of fashion in high school, it had proved too much for Eddie. She’d declined many an invitation and consequently missed out on a fair amount of pashing and the like.

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

“Yes.”

“Josh will probably be wearing skinny jeans and boat shoes and one of those checkered shirts. We can go shopping if you like.”

“Yes. He conforms in most respects – hair, fashion, school subjects, even his preference for females.”

“What? Since when did you know who Josh fancies?” She couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing.

“Your friend Josh, we’ve spoken before. We talked for around 13 minutes about movies we had seen and music bands that we enjoyed.”

“But what did he say about girls?”

He looked at her, well through her. “Did you know he has seen *Velvet Goldmine*? We talked for approximately half of the time about Brian Slade and Maxwell Demon and the similarities to Ziggy Stardust.”

“Did he tell you those names or did you tell him?” She thought she knew what Josh liked but this information was new. Glam rock cult movies? Who knew?

“He told me about his love of cult music movies. *This is Spinal Tap* is in his top five films of all time. ”

“When was this?” She couldn’t remember when Jed would have been able to talk so long to Josh.

“When he called you. I was doing my exercises and I was feeling quite disturbed because I was over half way through and I had to interrupt my session. I tried to dismiss him but he was quite insistent on talking.”

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

Dismiss him? It got worse! “When did he call? Why didn’t you tell me?” Her brother had talked to the hottest guy around and hadn’t bothered to tell her.

“There was no message. He simply wanted to talk to you. You weren’t in. I was. I talked in your place.”

She dug her nails so hard into the flesh of her palms that she could feel the crescent shapes she’d left. “In my place? And I suppose you told him how much I like him and then had a discussion about why we wouldn’t be suited.”

Jed stared at her. “Well, I did tell him you had feelings for him. That’s true.”

She coughed.

“And that it might be appropriate for him to ask you to accompany him on a social occasion.”

She died. Right there. This was what it felt like to curl up and die.

“And that’s how we arrived at our conversation about movies and music. I suggested that you liked to go to the movies.”

He stopped talking. He began to fiddle with his fingers. “I did the wrong thing, didn’t I?”

Her veins bubbled and she knew she hadn’t died. No, she’d have to face Josh. She’d have to face him and take her brother to the party. She snapped her lips together to stop herself blurting out something too hurtful. But she couldn’t help sound bitter. “No. It’s fine. My life is over. But you didn’t do anything wrong. Maybe we could go shopping later. For your outfit.” Her voice flatlined.

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

“Your life is certainly not over. Josh invited you to his party. I thought you would be happy.”

“He invited most of the year level.”

“And me,” he said triumphantly.

“Yes. And you,” she said, trying to smile. It would be so much better if she could smile.

When Jed was in Grade 3 and Edie was about to start prep the school ran a series of orientation days for new pupils. The memory of swinging the bag on her shoulders packed with play lunch and a pencil case and following her big brother into the assembly area could still make her smile. But the memory of what followed always caused her skin to prickle and her stomach to ripple with anger.

“Jed is dead, Jed is dead, Jed is dead.” The chant was more like a low murmur to start with. Just one boy. Saul Watkins. Edie didn’t notice first of all. She was playing in the sandpit. Jed was walking around it.

“Twenty seven paces from this corner to the diagonal opposite. Twenty-seven. My favourite.” Jed stood with his spindly arms straight by his side, his white hair cut above his ears. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

“Twenty seven is good,” Edie said looking up at him. He looked so big and so authoritative in his uniform. She was the only would be preppie in the sandpit whose older sibling was interacting with them. She felt proud that he wanted to be with her. What she didn’t realise then that their being together was just an accident of geography. He regularly spent his breaks walking by the sandpit. By

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

the time he graduated primary school he could walk round the entire sandpit in twenty seven paces.

“Jed is dead, Jed is dead, Jed is dead.” The chant grew louder. Edie looked around to find the voice. A boy with black hair, shiny like crow’s feathers, stood in front of small group of other boys chanting. His face was beaming with the power he held in those words. The other boys looked nervous, hands in pockets, eyes flicking around. Jed carried on walking.

Edie stopped digging. She looked at Jed. She expected him to react. She wanted him to turn on these boys and tell them to nick off. But he just carried on walking around. Counting his steps. Edie looked at him again. Instead of being big and authoritative he’d shrunk into an insignificant, pasty looking boy with a stiff gait and a straight back.

“Jed is dead, Jed is dead.” The group lunged forward and a couple of the other little kids got out of the sandpit. Edie stood up. Instead of wishing that she was tall and strong and loud so she could stand up for her brother, she found herself wishing she wasn’t his sister. The thought still horrified her.

Jed stopped walking when she stood up. He seemed confused, and looked as though he would rip into her for spoiling his ritual. Instead he picked up a shovel from the sand and swung it suddenly into Saul Watkins’ face leaving him with a bloodied nose and a bad case of humiliation. At that moment Edie knew she was about to cry but to this day she’d never worked out if it was because Jed had become the hero brother she wanted or because she had been about to disown him.

Twenty seven ways to love your brother

They had arrived at the party early at Jed's insistence. He disliked the feeling of walking into a crowded room.

Sassy threw herself at Edie and offered a reserved hand to Jed. "Cool boots."

Edie watched him glow. How could Sass be so laid back?

Jed proceeded to pace the square of floorboards that made the dancefloor.

"I can do it in twenty-seven steps if I minimise my stride length on the longer sides," he said to Edie as she handed him a lemonade. He flipped his cape over his shoulders just as Josh appeared. Edie cringed. Josh laughed. For a second she saw a flash of Saul Watkins dart in front of her eyes. She squeezed her hands and waited for the chanting to begin. Instead Josh made a grab for Jed's hand and pumped it, a broad grin spreading across his face.

"Great outfit, Josh. Very Maxwell Demon. Wish I looked as good in purple."

"I'm pleased you like it, Josh. But I'm afraid I only have a limited choice of clothes to wear. Edie is the fashion genius."

He turned towards her. She felt her knees give. "Edie, how are you? Your brother is right. You look a million dollars."

He kissed her cheeks. Both of them. Slowly. She let her hands unfold. Jed continued on his walk and for now he seemed like a pretty good brother.

(2374 words)