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Monologue
(Upper Grades)

Aging Out

Tough love: JD turns 18 and ages out of the foster care system with—possibly—nowhere to go and nowhere to live. . . .

by Christina Hamlett

Character

JD, 18, can be played by male or female

TIME: *The present.*

SETTING: *All action transpires on a softly-lit stage which is bare with the exception of a waist-high table. On the table are a small suitcase, a neatly folded stack of clothes, some new tennis shoes, a few books, a teddy bear, and an envelope.*

AT RISE: *Offstage, the faint sound of JD singing “Happy Birthday” is heard. After a moment, s/he enters, wearing a secondhand sweater, jeans and flip-flops and carrying a lighted cupcake on a small plate.*

JD (Singing): Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to meeeeeee. Happy birthday to me. *(Pauses for a moment before blowing out the candle, then licks the frosting off the bottom of the candle and sets it on the plate)* How long, do you think, before I’ll get my wish? *(Smirks)* You’d think the universe would have it mem-

orized by now, seeing as how I’ve been wishing for the very same thing ever since I was, like, five years old. *(Looks heavenward)* Just give me a real place to call home, O.K.? Is that so much to ask? *(Starts to nibble on the cupcake)*

I’m starting to realize that maybe you have to be more specific about this wishing thing. You want a home? Is that all? O.K., we’ll give you a home. Trouble is that I’ve had nine different homes ever since I started wishing and none of them except this last one have managed to stick. Why is it, I wonder? Was there something wrong with me or something wrong with the fosters who kept taking me in?

When you turn 18, all these doors are suddenly supposed to start magically opening up. At least that’s what I’ve heard. You’re suddenly free. You’re an adult. The world is your oyster. Blah blah blah. For the kids at my school, turning 18 was all that any of them ever wanted to talk about. Some already have their first jobs. Some are planning to get married and start having kids. The rest of ’em are jazzed about throwing their graduation caps in the air and going off to college. Seems like everyone is going somewhere. Everyone except me.

"Bet you can't wait to get out from under your 'rents," they've said to me. I'd only been at this school for a year and a half and never felt the need to correct 'em that the Mom and Dad who have always showed up for my school stuff and track meets aren't my real parents. It's even funny how some of 'em have said, "Wow, you look just like your Mom," or "You've got your Dad's eyes," when this is in no way biologically possible. Everybody assumes that when you're 18, you can't wait to ditch the rules and the curfews and move out and be your own person. Not me. If only I could stay where I was forever (*Shakes head*)—except the state says that I can't. I'm 18 now—today, in fact—and the state has rules that say I'm no longer anyone's responsibility. Trans-lated: You're officially a burden. If your fosters want to keep you, it's their problem to figure out how. Where we live, 18 is the cut-off for foster parents to get money for your upkeep. It's called (*Air quotes*) aging out and there's no turning back the clock to get something different. Bye-bye. Don't let the door hit you on the way out. (*JD sets down cupcake plate, opens the suitcase, and proceeds to put the layers of clothing into it.*)

At least this time I'm leaving with a new suitcase. I've never had a suitcase before. Every time I've been shuffled to a new situation—that's what they call it at Social Services—I've taken my belongings in a black plastic garbage bag. Pretty humiliating. I didn't mind it all that much when I was younger. Kids don't really know the difference, do they? But once I turned 13, I saw it for what it was, that I was garbage someone no longer wanted to bother with. Just put me out on the curb and assume someone else would come along and pick me up.

The social workers and the various fosters used to ask me if I remembered

anything about who I was before no one wanted me. (*Muses on this a bit*) The memories come and go. Mostly lately, they go. At some point, they'll probably be gone all together. I think after I was born we lived in an apartment. Maybe it was a motel. And then another motel after that. I had older brothers and sisters but they didn't pay much attention to me. I guess, being the youngest, I was the most expendable. Maybe my mother thought I was cute and I'd be easily adoptable, like a puppy or a kitten. The idea of being fostered is that someone would take to me and want me to officially be their own. Except they didn't.

Maybe like a puppy or a kitten I was cute at the start and then they realized raising a child was too much effort. I tried my hardest to fit in and to make them love me but nothing I did ever seemed to work. Some of them, I've come to realize, were only going the fostering route because they wanted to be considered "do-gooders." Others were doing it for the government money they got for it. As I understand it, the money was supposed to go toward things like making sure I got enough to eat and that I had clean clothes to wear. In the situations where there were other kids, it didn't take a rocket scientist to see they were getting more of that reimbursement than me. (*Thoughtfully looks at each book before placing it in the suitcase*)

Don't get me wrong. Not all my situations were bad. There was one couple that was really nice. They'd been trying for a really long time to have a baby and then I think they decided to give up. As often happens, I've heard, when a couple gives up trying, that's when they suddenly find out they're expecting. I remember being very excited about this because I'd have a little brother or sister I could help

take care of. Except right after the baby was born, they decided it would require all of their attention and there wouldn't be any time left over for me. (*Picks up teddy bear*)

If they had kept me, I'd have given this little bear to my new sib. It's the only thing I have left from the life I don't remember but it was that important for me to show my excitement and my love.

My early teens were really hard. Let's just say I fell into some situations where bad things were going on that I knew were wrong. It made me scared and I felt like I couldn't get anyone who would believe me. I ran away a couple of times until finally I got a nice police lady to listen to me. Back I went to Social Services but the fosters I'd run away from said I was a troublemaker and a liar and it scared me that maybe I'd never get another placement.

All the while I was doing as well as I could in school. I had no idea what the future held for me. I had teachers who encouraged me but I never felt as if I could confide in them. Not really. The last thing I wanted was for them to think I was a whiney complainer or a charity case who should be reported on.

I'd really like to get some sort of job so I could at least contribute. I feel guilty about everything my current Mom and Dad have done for me. They don't have that much—I know that—but they gave me a nice room and good food and I can talk to them about anything. That's something I never had before. Anyway, if I don't have a job, I'd feel like I was just sponging and they don't deserve that. Problem is, jobs around here are few and far between for kids with no experience and even those have already gone to the kids who had more going for them from the start than I'd ever have. I know in some states that foster kids my age can

get job training and even get help trying to find employers. Unfortunately, I live in one that does as little as possible.

I haven't had a lot of friends (*Shrugs*). . .that's by choice. I knew which groups to stay away from because they'd only spell trouble. It's sad how kids who are lonely can fall in with these bad groups because it's the only place they feel they're accepted. I wasn't going to fall into that trap. As for the groups I wanted to be a part of, I knew I couldn't invite them to hang out at my house because, technically, it would never be my house. (*Picks up tennis shoes*)

I really like sports. I always have. One of the coaches at my school said I should apply for a scholarship because it could pay my way to college. College? As if! I wouldn't know the first place to begin with that. "I could talk to your parents about it," she offered, but I was too embarrassed to tell her what my real circumstances were.

When you're 18 and you grow up with a normal life, you're supposed to know stuff and be ready to take on the world. The problem is, who's supposed to teach you? I knew a little about cooking and cleaning from helping around different houses where I lived, but everything else like Life Skills 101 was all foreign to me. I took Drivers Ed but I knew there'd be no way I could ever afford a car. And so I've memorized the bus routes and am resigned to other people getting me to where I want to go.

When I got my current fosters, I thought it was a dream. I'd wake up in the middle of the night just to remind myself where I was. They're older than previous fosters I've had and they're very kind. They never had kids of their own but they said they felt like wanting to give back. Part of me secretly

hoped they'd decide to outright adopt me. I know because of their ages, though, and the health of my foster father that this will never happen. We've talked about my turning 18 and it makes them sad. "We'd love to keep you," they've said and I know they genuinely mean it. "We'll figure out how to make do without state money," they told me, but I know it means they'd be scrimping. When I think about all the other situations where my foster parents were only in it for the monthly checks they were getting, it just makes me angry. Why should love have to come with a price tag?

They're planning a special celebration dinner for me tonight but I'm not exactly sure what we're celebrating. That it's my last dinner in a real home and from here on, I'm on my own? (*Picks up envelope*)

They gave me this envelope and told me not to open it until I finished my cupcake. I'm sure it's a very nice card and some kind of sentiment about staying in touch. Maybe if I take a really long time eating my cupcake, I can put off the pain of forced goodbyes for as long as possible. Except that's not really possible, is it? (*JD sets down the envelope, picks up the cupcake and proceeds to eat it. For the audience, this is an agonizing wait until s/he finally finishes, brushes the crumbs off and, with a heavy sigh, picks up the envelope. Briefly scanning the letter's contents, JD is dumbfounded by what they reveal. S/he clears her throat and proceeds to read.*)

"Our dearest child, for how can we think of you in any other way? You

have brought so much joy to our lives and we feel blessed by whatever stroke of Fate has made you a member of our little family. It has been hard to keep such a big secret from you for the past year but we wanted to ensure everything was in place before we said anything. As you know, Coach Fischer thinks the world of you and your talents in track and field. When she reached out to us (*After a beat*)—when she reached out to us and said you were deserving of a scholarship, we could not have been more excited. Since neither of us had that opportunity at your age, we wouldn't have figured out by ourselves how to even start this process. Coach Fischer asked us to trust her. On her own, she submitted your transcripts and filed the necessary paperwork and academic endorsements. We gave this our complete blessing, and when she called to tell us you had been accepted for—(*Gasps in disbelief*) for a full scholarship to Flintridge University, we could not have been more proud. Though this opportunity comes with room and board, please know you are more than welcome to come back on weekends and tell us all about your classes. Love, Your Mom and Dad. P.S. Now clean up those crumbs and come down to dinner." (*JD wipes away tears, sets down envelope and take the teddy bear out of the suitcase.*)

Well, Teddy, looks like we'll be staying a while. (*Kisses the bear on the head and smiles*) Home. (*Lights fade to black. Curtain*)

THE END

(*Production & Historical Notes on page 37*)