

Balloon Party

By Catherine Austen

My little sister Sophia was turning seven. “Where’s the party?” I asked.

“No party this year,” Mom said. “I spent too much on her bike.”

Sophia raced out of bed in her unicorn pajamas. “Today’s my birthday! Can Veronica come to my party?”

Mom sighed.

I looked online. A two-hour party at the jungle gym cost \$250. “How many dollars do you have?”

I asked Mom.

“Negative three hundred. You?”

“Ten. A house party could work—if we had a house.”

Our apartment building had a backyard with a weedy lawn, a broken sidewalk, and a rickety bench. Mom hung our clothes out there once, but they got stolen. Not an ideal venue, but it would do.

“Invite all your friends to a 4:00 party!” I told Sophia.

Mom gaped. “You’ll need snacks, games, entertainment, a cake—we can’t afford it, Thomas.”

“Back soon!” I shouted.

I spent seven of my ten dollars on a unicorn puzzle. With 15% tax, it cost \$8.05, leaving me \$1.95 for a party. *This is doable*, I thought.

I bought a helium balloon for \$1.50 plus tax. They rounded the total to \$1.75 since I was paying cash.

"I have 20 cents left over!" I boasted when I got home.

I printed a message to hang in the lobby:

Sophia's 7th Birthday Party

4:00 p.m. in the backyard.

All welcome.

The baker in 3B is especially welcome.

"You can't make a party with one balloon," Mom said.

"Yes, I can. I read a story about how it's done."

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11:00 a.m., five hours to prepare

I tied the balloon to the bench and paced the yard, shouting, "What a great place for a party!"

Mr. Rinaldo, the superintendent, poked his head outside. "Nice balloon."

"It's my sister Sophia's birthday!" I shouted. "You should come to the party. Everyone will be out here admiring your groundskeeping."

He looked at the overgrown bushes, the grimy sidewalk, the bird poop on the fence. "Is there time to clean up and mow the lawn?"

"Sure. The party's at 4:00. Bring your kids."

He smiled. "Does Sophia like nachos?"

Venue: ~~\$75~~ Free

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12:00 noon, four hours to prepare

I pulled a cardboard box from the recycling bin and misspelled *Happy birthy Sophia* in sloppy red letters that slanted downward and off the page.

Sam and Kim, the artists from 1A, were returning from a walk. “The grounds are so clean!” Kim exclaimed.

“Nice balloon,” Sam added.

“It’s my sister Sophia’s birthday,” I said. “I’m going to display your arts-and-crafts book at the party. You should come. I’ll make you a sign after I redo this one.”

Sam cringed at my greasy sign. “We have Bristol board and lettering pens. We could make signs for you.”

“Great.” I held up a handful of dirty shoelaces. “I guess I’ll just hang the streamers.”

“We have bunting,” Jamie offered.

“Sophia wants to learn to make bunting!”

“We could show her at the party,” Jamie said. “Maybe set up a craft table?”

“Creative kids need refreshments,” Sam said. “We’ll bring popsicles.”

Decorations: ~~\$30~~ Free

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1:00 p.m., three hours to prepare

The whole yard was blossoming with colour by the time the retired gym teacher from 2D was jogging home. “A birthday party, huh? Nice balloon.”

I smiled. “I’m making a coin toss with one dime and two nickels. That’s a game for lazy seven-year-olds, right?”

She scowled. “Why not get them moving?”

“You think?”

“Yes! Set stations around the yard. A three-legged race on the lawn, hopscotch on the concrete,

musical chairs by the fence.”

“Too bad I don’t know those games. Poor Sophia will never learn them.”

“I could set them up for you.”

“Great! The party’s at 4:00. Bring your grandchildren. There’ll be popsicles.”

She snorted. “You’ll need more than popsicles for active kids. I’ll make corndogs and a veggie plate.”

Activities: ~~\$25~~ Free

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2:00 p.m., two hours to prepare

The lawn was marked into lanes and the pavement was chalked for hopscotch by the time Evie Ling from 4C came home from music lessons. “Who knew this place could be so pretty? Nice balloon.”

“My sister invited a dozen kids to her birthday party,” I said. “They can’t wait for the entertainment.”

“What entertainment?”

“I memorized all your songs. Sophia loves them.” I belted out a verse in shaky falsetto. “Can I borrow a microphone?”

“You’re not messing up my songs,” Evie said. “But I could practice out here for the kids.”

“Great. Invite the whole band.”

“Do you have pop? We get thirsty when we sing.”

“Uh...”

“I’ll bring pop and juice. See you soon!”

Entertainment: ~~\$70~~ Free

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3:00 p.m., one hour to prepare

I slipped an invitation under every door, saving apartment 3B for last. Delicious smells drew me closer: cinnamon, chocolate, vanilla, raspberry. The man who lived there had never once smiled at me, and he didn't smile then as he opened the door. He wore a long black apron dusted with flour.

"Making a YouTube video?" I said. "I saw yesterday's. Banana cream pie. Delicious. Too bad it only got 17 views."

"What do you want?" he said.

I passed him an invitation. "Sophia loves sweets, so I'll be streaming your YouTube channel at her party. I hope you'll come. You don't have to eat the bargain cake we're serving."

"You're serving cheap cake?"

"The cheapest. Kids will eat anything, right?"

"Unfortunately."

"The whole building's coming—artists, musicians, cake-loving partiers who can't wait to include you in their social media posts."

His eyes narrowed.

I slapped my head. "If I'd invited you sooner, you could have made a birthday cake for today's video! I'm sorry. I never thought of it as free advertising."

"I'm about to ice a chocolate cake."

"What a coincidence!"

“I mentioned it in yesterday’s video.”

“I don’t suppose you could make it look like a unicorn?”

He almost smiled. “Leave space on the table for my business cards.”

Cake: ~~\$50~~ Free

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4:00 p.m. Party time

The yard overflowed with music and games, arts and crafts, food and drinks, a pile of presents, and a joyful crowd.

“Happy Birthday!” everyone shouted as Sophie cut her magnificent cake.

“I want my next party here,” her friend Veronica said.

Mom leaned close and whispered, “How much did this cost, Thomas?”

“It’s worth \$250,” I said. “But it cost \$1.75.”

“How’d you do it?”

“With one balloon.” I smiled. “Now, if I can find a stone, I’ll make some soup.”

THE END