A Time For Decision

"TWENTY-ONE," someone said, "What's that . . . a disease?"

. . . Laughter.

"I was twenty-one myself once." It was Bill's father speaking, presiding as usual at the head of the table, but smiling along with the others.

"Oh, Dad, were you? I don't remember that."

"See here, young lady, if you did remember that far back you'd be ashamed to say so . . ." Again laughter. But the laughter softened, ebbed away until only a smile was left on each face. Bill's mother's smile showed contentment at a job well done . . her son . . twenty-one. His sister's smile said . . "It's wonderful having a big brother."

And as Bill's father rolled the cigar around his face, there was pride behind his smile, too. A curving of the lips which said, "Always wanted a son . . yup . . a son . . make him an engineer like his father . . yup . . take over when the old man quits."

Then Bill looked at Marge, his fiancee. She met his gaze with a special smile which seemed to say, "I'm alien to this family circle, but because you're here, I'm enjoying every minute." Yes, for Bill this night was perfect.

"I hope you haven't all eaten too much," his mother was saying, "You must have room for dessert." And she asked Bill's sister to clear the table and bring the cake while she got up and went to the library. There was the general clatter of dishes and the sound of cupboard doors as his sister prepared the coffee and dessert. It would be chocolate cake, his favorite. A smoke ring glided past his face, then another. It was his father's after-dinner pastime to sit and practice what he must have considered the art of being a big executive . . "To be a big man one must blow big smoke rings . . ."

Bill's mother returned carrying two small packages. As she walked, she swayed in tempo to her soft singing . . "Happy birthday, Dear Bill . . Happy birthday to you."

One of the packages was obviously a book and the other an envelope. He opened the envelope first, read the card and looked
at the five-dollar bill. “Thanks, Jan,” he said when his sister poked her head through the doorway.

He looked at the other package lying on the table, with his mother’s handwriting on top... “To my son... with love, Mom.” He began to remove the wrappings. His father spoke, “Bill, I hope you don’t think I’ve forgotten your birthday. I don’t have a package for you, but...”

“That’s okay,” Bill interrupted, “I know how busy you are...”

“No. It wasn’t that I didn’t have time.” Bill was working with a knot in the ribbon. “I have something special in mind.” His father drew out his leather checkbook. “I’ve decided to let you have a check for enough money to finish your schooling and—get married. How’s that for a birthday present from the old man... eh?”

Bill stared at his father’s smiling face. “Why... why... gosh, Dad, that would be swell!”

His father was muttering... “Let’s see, I’d figured about twenty-five hundred... better make it three thousand.”

Bill had the wrappings off now, and the book lay before him, the title, Famous Psychiatrists, Past and Present. He said, “This is swell, Mom. Thanks. Where’d you manage to get it? They didn’t have it downtown when I tried...” He began thumbing eagerly through the pages.

“Well,” his mother smiled, “I knew you wanted it, so I sent to Aunt Ruth in Chicago and had her get it.”

“Gee... thanks again, Mom.” He started to put it down on the table. The newness of the book slapped it shut, and it fell out of his grasp with a thud, blowing cigar ashes over the open checkbook. His father jerked in the midst of his signature. “What the devil!” he exploded. “Now I’ll have to make out a new one.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Bill said quietly.

His father ripped the damaged check from the book and tossed it, crumpled, onto the table. As he did, he noticed the title of the book. He stopped short, laid down his pen and lifted the book. “What’s this?”

“It’s from Mom,” Bill explained.

“From Mom? Well... uh... what sort of book is it?”

“Just what the title says... about famous psychiatrists.”

Bill’s Dad cleared his throat. “Well,” he said, “I think it’s nice of you to remember Bill, mother, but... ah... isn’t that a
rather strange book for a young man to own? One who's going to be an engineer?"

His father's words fell into a silence. Bill glanced over at his mother, who looked down at the napkin in her lap. "A young man—one who's going to be an engineer." He didn't want to build bridges. He'd known that for a long time, but he hadn't said so. His father had always counted on him to carry on the contracting business after he'd retired. But now he had to tell his father, or rather—tell the fat cigar in his father's face. He knew no other part of the man would ever listen to argument.

His father's face was firm and resentful and his gaze went first to Bill, then to his mother, and back again to Bill.

His mother was the first to speak. She said quietly, "Bill, I think you'd better tell him your plans."

"All right." He took a deep breath and began, "The fact is, Dad, I'm not going to be an engineer. It may be a fine field and all that, but I want to do something I can enjoy." He groped for the right words, to make his father understand. But there were no words except those which had been living in him for so long, waiting for release. He blurted them out. "I want to be a psychiatrist!"

There was no sound. Bill's hands gripped the seat of his chair. He filled his lungs and leaned back, ready for the inevitable storm. But no storm broke. His father just looked at him, saying nothing. Then, without removing his eyes from Bill's face, he slowly picked up the book of blank checks. There was a soft slap as he closed the book. He leaned back replacing it in his inner pocket. Out of sight. So was the security of the future. Perhaps he should never have told his father. Maybe he should be an engineer. But now that he'd dared to say what he'd wanted to say for so long . . . he felt better. His hands relaxed on the chair seat, and he let the air in his lungs break free. The force of his breath caught a corner of the crumpled check lying beside his plate, whisked it into the air, and it settled gently to the floor.

A glumness hung over the rest of the meal. His father finished his cake and pushed back from the table. As he stood, he picked up his half-smoked cigar, lit it, and held it out, inspecting the ash for a moment. Then he turned and without excusing himself, walked away from the table. He entered the library, seated himself before the fire and at once began to blow smoke rings . . . big smoke rings.
Bill's sister was dawdling with a bit of cake. His mother was staring at her plate, her face lined with the quiet grief of a woman who'd watched for many years this silent bitter conflict between father and son.

Marge finally broke the silence. "Bill, I think I'd better be getting home... if you don't mind."

"Okay." He rose and helped her with her chair. As the two were leaving the room, his mother came over to them, "Marge... Bill, "she hesitated... then, "I'm so sorry." She turned and hurried toward the kitchen, lifting the corner of her apron to her eyes.

"Let's go," Bill said.

They drove along the streets not saying a word. The night was chill, and the silence was comforting to Bill. Back there, silence had been intolerable, but now he welcomed the peace that shared quiet brings. Finally he stirred. "Let's get a cup of coffee."

"Swell. I could use it."

Bill turned the car into the drive of a restaurant, parked and they went in. They sat awhile making whirlpools in their coffee. At last Bill spoke. "Let me tell you what it's like to have a man like Dad for a father." He took a long puff of his cigarette. "A kid likes to have his Dad do things with him, but there are things he doesn't like to do with his Dad... sounds confused, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but go on."

"Well, take for instance hunting. I never could see killing animals, just for the sake of killing. But Dad likes to hunt. He took me once. I'll never forget it. We were hunting pheasant out in South Dakota. I shot a bird and when the dog retrieved it and dropped it at my feet, I just stood there and looked at it. It was a beautiful bird but it was dead and I had killed it. And like any kid, I started to cry. Dad got a great kick out of laughing at me."

Marge looked startled. "Laughed at you? For something like that?"

"Yes. And that night I kept seeing dead pheasants lying all over the ground and hearing Dad's ridiculing laugh and seeing his cigar-stained mouth leering at me from every angle. I never went hunting again."

"I don't blame you."

"All his life Dad has worked from blueprints and specifications. He seems to have his mind set on a mammoth blueprint of his own life and his family's lives, and he refuses to accept any digressions." He drained his cup. "More coffee?"
"I could use another cup."

When Bill came back from the counter with their fresh coffees, he lit another cigaret and sat a moment contemplating the red glow and the curling smoke. "And so you see," he said, "tonight's been a crisis. I had to decide which one of us is going to run my life . . . if I wanted to make it sound dramatic, you might say it's . . . it's my time for decision."

"You're right, Bill. It is time. But I won't say anything to influence you. Just remember, no matter what you decide, I'm for you. We can make a go of anything, you and I, as long as we're together . . ." She ground out her cigaret and reached for her coat, "Come on," she said, "time I get home."

It was much later when Bill swung the car into the drive. As he opened the garage doors he noticed a light still burning in the library. He glanced at his watch—twelve-twenty-five—and wondered who was up at that hour. His mother and father were usually in bed by eleven. He drove the car in the garage, locked the door, and started toward the house. As he passed the library window he saw his father sitting by the fire, puffing the usual cigar. He went inside, closing the door loudly.

There was a stir in the library. "That you, Bill?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Come in here a minute, will you?"

There was a strange note in his father's voice. Usually he called, "Come here!" and meant it. Bill entered the room, slipped off his coat, and draped it over a chair. This was it, he thought. This was the storm that had failed to break at dinner time. His father was going to try and force him to be an engineer. Well, he wouldn't be forced.

"Sit down." His father spoke quietly.

Bill took a chair facing him. He looked at his father. There was no difference in his appearance. And yet his voice, the way he spoke, wasn't the same. An inner voice warned him not to drop his guard, that all this composure on his father's part was only a ruse.

"Bill," the words came deliberately, "I'm sorry that things turned out the way they did. Especially on your birthday."

Was this an apology? "Well, Dad, . . . it couldn't be helped."

"No . . you're right. It had to come sometime." His father flicked ashes on the hearth, "And now that it has, I think we'd better get it straightened out, once and for all."
"Okay."

"Well, then . . . what makes you so set against engineering?"

"It's not that, Dad. I'd have the same feeling if you wanted me to be a dentist, I suppose. The thing is, I want to go into psychiatry."

His father rose and turned away, muttering derisively to himself, ". . . son of mine . . . a psychiatrist!"

"Dad, maybe I should ask you what you have against psychiatry."

His father had no answer for that. He said, "You leave the asking of questions to me."

Bill countered, "Well, give me at least one good reason."

His father wheeled. "Now you listen to me. I don't have to give any reasons to you, or anybody else. If I say I don't like the idea, that's the end of it!" His calm exterior had vanished. Bill saw the same father he'd always known—the tyrant, demanding obedience.

He fought back, "It may be the end of it for you, but not for me! I could never like being an engineer. Can't you see that?"

"No. I can't."

"Have you tried?"

"I don't have to, dammit!" His father's voice rose higher, "What I say goes around here . . . it always has and it always will!"

"Not this time."

"What's that?" he snapped.

"Not this time, Dad. Here's once someone has turned against you and you can't take it."

"Yeah?" his father snorted. He turned his back on Bill and flung his cigar at the fire.

"That's right," Bill repeated, "You can't take it. This time your blueprint has turned out a flaw. Something's gone haywire some place in your plans, and you can't figure it out." Bill stopped. Perhaps he'd said too much already. But there was so much built up within him, "Dad, you can't . . . Nobody can build his son with the same precision and planning that he uses building a bridge. You're dealing with a mind . . . a person! And that person has a blueprint of his own. I don't know which one of us is right in this, but I know what I want. And what I want is best . . . somehow . . . for me."
The room was quiet. Bill stood watching his father. The man was gazing at the fire. He'd said nothing for several minutes—only listened. And what he'd heard, for the first time, was the truth about himself.

Bill spoke, awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to talk as I did.." Still his father was quiet. "I'd like to do what you want... but... but..." He was more confused now than ever. He'd clashed with his father, something he'd always wanted to do—speak up to him, yet now there was no satisfaction in it. There was something between them that mere words couldn't penetrate. But he had to penetrate that wall. He couldn't go on living according to someone else's plans. Still, he couldn't break away, couldn't get inside the wall.

Finally Bill said, "Do you still want me to be an engineer?"

His father turned slowly and faced him. For the first time in his life, Bill saw his father hurt and confused. His reply was halting, almost humble, "Yes... Yes, Bill, I would... like to see you become an engineer."

It was as if something hard and powerful hit Bill in the pit of his stomach. The firmness and sureness of his mind was gone, swept away by the mixture of emotions that engulfed him... don't give up... be yourself... be a psychiatrist... be an engineer... honor thy father...

As his mind cleared he heard his own voice saying, "Is that the way you really want it, Dad?"

His father looked hard at him, but made no answer.

"Is it, Dad?"

"Bill," the voice was strangely tired and quiet, "how do I know what I want? I only know what I'd like. I'm going to bed." And he left Bill alone by the fire.

Bill sat motionless for a long while, thinking. Finally, things seemed clearer. In his father's bewilderment, there was hope for them both.

As he gathered up his coat and scarf, he glanced down at the fireplace. There, at the edge of the glowing coals, he saw all that remained of his father's cigar—the white ash of burned tobacco.