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### On the Greatest Thing Ever: The Process of Short Story Revision

Luke Son

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**FORM C**  
**COLLEGE SCHOLARS PROJECT APPROVAL**

Luke Son  
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Scholar

Dr. John Turner  
Mentor

On the greatest thing ever: The process of short story revision  
Project Title

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

(Minimum 3 Required)

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Dr. Christopher P. Craig C. Craig

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**College Scholars Program**

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August 24, 2005

TO: Tammy Murphy, Office of the Registrar

FROM: Christopher Craig, Director of College Scholars

RE: Luke L. Son, 410-45-6561

The student referenced above, Luke L. Son, [REDACTED], has successfully completed his College Scholars project requirement for graduation.

Her transcript should read:

Major: College Scholars Program

Emphasis: Biochemistry, Creative Writing, and Emergency Medicine

Thank you for your care in this.

On the Greatest Thing Ever: the processes of short story revision.

Luke Son's College Scholars senior project addendum.

## I. Abstract:

The following paper outlines the reasons for writing a short story as a College Scholars project, and chronicles the process of writing it from its conception through two major drafts.

## II. Introduction:

Reflecting on my time spent in Knoxville, I realized there were only a few occasions where I was required or even allowed to create pieces that were purely products of imagination. While creative freedom was not altogether absent in my education, it existed only in degrees within the delivered certainty of the undergraduate science curriculum or the well defined protocols of the emergency room. Keeping this in mind when planning a capstone project, I set out to create a work that was, from beginning to end, entirely synthetic. I wanted to make something which excluded the

lessons and experiences of both my personal histories and education because these are things that are already known or experimentally defined.

Such criteria quickly eliminated categories of possible projects. Scientific papers are based on derived or presupposed data, and the technical lessons of the hospital and ambulance were nearly impossible mold into an appropriate presentation. The only remaining option was to write a short story, an ideal canvas for such a project.

Writing has been an integral, albeit underdeveloped, element of my education. Through stories, essays, and letters I have been able to reconcile the remembered characters and events of my past and reconstitute the blank stretches in-between. The pursuit of medicine has been a heavy influence in my writing, and by examining situations through fiction I have begun to reveal the sad comedy of the ER and the tragedy incurred as people try to help others that would rather not be saved.

While such stories are mostly fictional and require the imagination to fuel character and setting, they are dependent on my observations and my own interpretation of actual events. As such, writing a similar piece of work for my project would have defeated my primary goal of excluding all things personal. Knowing this I set about to write a story that was completely free of the familiar character, personality, and situational archetypes I utilized in the past to ensure the resulting framework was purely a product of imagination.

“The Greatest Thing Ever” is my attempt at such a story. During its conception I selectively eliminated all things that were personal or things I could easily relate to in order to create a work that was fictional in the strictest sense. It was an exercise to see if,

after years of technical lesions and experimental absolutes, I was able to conceptualize fictional characters, scenes, and situations that were external to my experience.

This addendum is a review of the process, starting from the conception of the first manageable draft through its next major revision. For each draft critical elements of the story are examined and analyzed to explain how they came to be and show the reasoning of why they were retained, modified, or eliminated through revision. By chronicling the progress in this fashion, I intend to demonstrate the process of creating fiction from the ground up, with only the architecture of a blank page to guide me.

### III. Conception:

#### A) Format

In keeping with the purposes of the project, I set out to write the story with little more than the idea that I eliminate all things familiar to me and some basic decisions on how to go about writing the piece. The first of these was the decision to write in a linear fashion, from beginning to end, in order to avoid the distraction of finding ways to cobble disjointed scenes together after they were written. I then decided to write a story with major conflicts and themes that were not contingent on extreme physical actions, i.e. falling planes or the unfolding drama of an ambulance. At the same time I did not want to separate the action of the story from its major characters, thus keeping the story within realistic limits; although the story was to be fiction through and through, I did not want to drift into the genres of science fiction or fantasy.

#### B) Conflict/Character

When deliberating over possible starting points for the story, it was decided that at least one character in would be approaching middle-age and would undergo or be approaching the point of undergoing a mid life crisis. This was partially a matter of convenience as the character satisfied two immediate criteria. That is, the character's internal conflicts could be integrated into their actions, and would be external to my experience as a 22 year old college student. Also, by default stereotype, the character would be male.

My conception of what the mid-life crisis entailed was anecdotal and limited to jokes and sitcom depictions of men with receding hairlines making sudden and extravagant purchases or similarly outlandish decisions as a compensatory reaction to growing older. To capitalize on this archetype, to me, seemed cliché. Additionally, it would also require me to write a story that relied too strongly on situational comedy or the extreme actions and subsequent consequences of the character. To avoid this, I decided instead to focus on the internal mechanisms in place that may set off a mid-life crisis, and what external events or circumstances one encounters that triggers them. In doing so I found that I had created a basic framework for both the internal and external tensions of the main character's conflict.

It should be noted here that at this point I was not consciously thinking about the introduction of clinical psychology when conceptualizing what type of person the main character would be. But the examination of internal mechanisms is inherently psychological, and I found myself attempting to loosely profile possible ideas about what these could be with a limited knowledge of psychological phenomena.



I was unsure of what role other minor characters in the story would fit within the conflict framework, or if I would introduce them at all. To choose the latter would steer the focus almost entirely upon the main character and his conflicts and internal tensions, without leaving room to explain how they came to be without large and complex digressions from the plot. I feared that introducing such elements into the story would change the nature of the conflict from one of age to one of madness. It was a direction that I did not want nor was prepared to take, so the decision was made to drive the story through external circumstances and interactions.

#### B) Setting/Scene

Once I was able to develop a general sense of what my main character was and what his major conflict might be in the story, I began to think about what places and scenes were an appropriate backdrop for the story. I took care to not use places that were too exotic or that might be the direct result of the crisis, i.e. a dock slip at the edge of Fiji holding a newly purchased yacht. Such scenes were too obviously tied to the primary conflicts and I was afraid that in the process of writing the story I would become dependent on the use of such scenes to drive the action forward.

Opposite this, I wanted the geographical placement of the characters to be meaningful or at least suggestive of larger themes in the story. I had assumed at this point there was to be some sense of personal or familial upheaval, but at this point did not know how to reflect these problems without introducing a heavy-handed sense of symbolism.

For the purposes of just establishing a starting point, an immediate and specific location was needed. After several sketches and loose outlines, I began the story at the

time of the main character's adolescence. In doing so I hoped to establish the characters early conflicts, the beginnings of discontent which would be developed further along into the story's larger and primary ordeals.

When the decision was made to start the story in the character's past, it became mandatory that later passages detail his adult life. At this early stage I was unsure if I would be able to smoothly and adequately shift between his past and present lives. I decided to keep place by making the weather of his childhood unbearably hot and that of his present adult life bitter cold. This was less of a dramatic element than a personal reminder to keep myself aware of what period of the character's life I was writing about.

#### IV. First Draft Development

##### A)Format

The attached first draft was the earliest rendition of the story that included some sense of beginning, middle, and an end. It was also the first version to be typed on computer. As such it was more comprehensive than earlier hand written sketches, and while far from done it was more complete as a story than previous attempts.

Despite my initial desire to write a story in a linear fashion, I found that a more complex structure was sometimes easier to write and made the content of the story more interesting than if it were written as planned. I also found focusing on one character or event for prolonged periods of time to be tedious to read because in devoting narrow focus to single points in a linear narrative, I unintentionally ignored the larger themes and contexts of the story. By breaking up and rearranging the passages, I was able to avoid a

personal sense of tedium and draw attention to significant events rather than just leading the reader to them.

This was a relatively new development during this draft's development, and my earlier fears of having disjointed scenes were realized. The primary focus at the time was to have written a functional piece, and lack of smooth transitions is evident throughout.

This is most clearly evidenced at the following points:

Page 1, line 7

Page 3, line 15

Page 4, line 33

Page 7, line 14

Each of these shifts into different places or times seemed forced or sudden. The overall effect fragmented the story into islands of information, and while alone they did contain some degree of character value, their contribution to the plot or action of the story was poor.

Despite this, the overall content of the story had been developed adequately to enact the following elements.

## B) Conflict/Character

It may appear that in this draft my original intent to write the story of a man approaching or undergoing a mid-life crisis was largely abandoned, but this is not the case. While Patrick, the father approaching middle age, does not exhibit what is

considered classic behavior of one undergoing a mid-life crisis, it was my intention that he develop the inner tensions that drive one.

It was a widely held belief that such crises generate from a sense of impotence, defeat, or general failure to live up to the standards projected during earlier times. I wanted Patrick's sense of crisis to develop as he reconciled his present life with one in the past. This was attempted by giving Patrick two separate presences in the story, the one of a private school hellion and that of a single father/ professional. I designated separate identities for each, going so far as to give Patrick a different name, Pip, towards the end of the draft. The first draft flashed back and forth between the dual identities in order to demonstrate the distance between them, and the extreme nature of the rift. This was also done in an attempt to add dramatic elements to the story, as seen in page 3, lines 15 through 28 as his dream about being a bored student at school is broken by the present interactions of day to day battles.

As the separation between Patrick's lives was being developed, it became clear that disjunction alone was not sufficient to drive the action of the story forward. It was during this time that Chris, his son, was introduced as a major character. Initially introduced primarily as a generator of circumstance, it became evident in his development that the tensions created in father/son interplay were too rich to dismiss as material.

From the opening scene Chris serves as the primary instigator of most of the story's external conflicts, as seen through his whining and complaints of his father's plan to send him to boarding school. He was also placed strategically in certain areas to reflect or draw attention to his father's internal conflicts. For instance, Page 2, lines 1

through 3, Patrick looks up at the distorted figure of his son in the distance, and becomes acutely aware of what he is doing and of how silly, strange, and adult he must look like to his son.

Other characters in this draft antagonize the conflict surrounding Patrick in a more direct and obvious manner. Most notable of these is the presence of another character with dual personas, Patrick's former classmate Drew Campbell. The nature of his past and present personalities do not clash as with Patrick, but they are juxtaposed as the boisterous and extroverted businessman introduced on page 4, line 3, is subsequently drawn as a quiet and pensive academy student twenty years earlier.

The purpose of Drew's dual personas was, as for Patrick, to demonstrate that he was a different person than his adolescent self. But unlike his former classmate, Drew was made to be more comfortable in the atmosphere of the reception, thus paralleling a sense of comfort with himself. While not a tactful, classy, or particularly agreeable character, the presence of Drew at the party was intended to represent what Patrick ultimately desire in his adult life, that is, success, companionship, and utility.

Theresa was introduced early on in this draft mostly to establish circumstances. Initially her presence was meant to explain the familial drama in the Carnate family, and to intermediate between their home in Connecticut and the academy in Georgia. As the story progressed she was given a larger role in order to reveal Chris's core personal conflicts in explicit psychological terms, and to allow Patrick to enact some of his.

As the only true female contribution to the story, I was careful not to let her character intrude too far into the daily interactions between Patrick and Chris. My fear was that by allowing her to do so, she would unconsciously assume the role of a mother

for Chris, which was purposely left out to prevent detracting from the father/son dynamic. This was also done for the sake of Patrick's development. Such development through Theresa can be seen most clearly in the paragraph starting on page 2, line 34, and in his reply to Drew's question about his love life on page 4, line 20. Both passages were intended to draw attention to Patrick's growing conflicts, the first addressing feelings of incompetence in fatherhood, and the second introducing a realization based on a muted sense of sexual tension that was developed very late in this draft.

### C) Setting/Scene

By the time this draft had been completed, the major locations for most of the story's happenings had already been established in New Haven, Connecticut, and at the Academy's location outside the city limits of Marietta, Georgia. These locations were chosen mostly for the sake of geographic separation than any specific quality these places may possess. The intention was to suggest that there existed an upheaval that required Patrick to move between these two places. More importantly the geographic separation was large enough to allow the reader to believe that Patrick's decisions concerning his son's education may at some level be an attempt to send him away.

While my attempt to keep the environment of the academy hot is evident in the opening passages of the story, later passages are largely devoid of descriptions of the weather. As the story developed, the need to designate specific and opposite climates to different locations evaporated as the majority of the story is written at Webb, and the passages involving New Haven were distinctive enough by action that I believed they did not need the added development in scene. For instance, the only meaningful passage set

outside of school or therapy culminates at page 3, line 27 as Patrick listens to the world outside him. The events immediately preceding this passage are a heavier demonstration of father/son stresses than in the opening of the story, and as such I did not find a need or place for descriptive reports of the weather.

#### D) Other technical elements and influences:

##### \* Psychological Elements

As stated earlier, a shallow knowledge of clinical psychology was referenced to generate ideas as to what internal conflicts could drive the story, and how these could be manifested. Also noted was my intention to not create a story that moved forward by heavy reliance on extreme circumstances or physical actions. Eliminating these, I found the use of clinical psychology to be an efficient way to explore and expose conflict.

Eventually, as the characters developed, I chose to saturate the interactions between Patrick and Chris with a defined behavior of the field – passive- aggression. I felt it to be the most appropriate device to use in this story, as even the smallest of actions are wrought with the conflicts of a larger external context. Outside of dialogue, Patrick and Chris never initiate interaction or react to each other in a manner that directly addresses the conflict at hand. For instance, the story opens with Chris's complaints of the heat, which is his response to the situation his father has placed him in.

Passive-aggression can also be used as a humorous element to use in writing the story for entertainment value. This is perhaps best seen in page 3, line 21, when Patrick wakes to find parenting books stacked on his nightstand in response to his attempts to get Chris to visit Webb.

### \*Humor

While I did not set out to write a comedy, I did make the attempt to add humorous passages in strategic places to highlight characters, increase the entertainment value of the piece, and to break the tedium during particularly long sessions of writing. The two passages in the story where humor was deliberately added consist of the understated list of Patrick's former mischief (Page 1, line 11), and the parenting book scene (Page 3, lines 21-26).

I attempted to write these passages using a muted style of humor that was ultimately contingent on the shortcomings of others. For the first scene it is the young Patrick taking advantage of an institution, and in the second it is Chris taking advantage of physical evidence of his father's inability to raise him. This inherently sadistic form of comedy is perhaps reflective of my recent reading of a work by Jim Knipfel titled "Ruining it for Everybody." The book is the latest in an accidental series in which he memoirs the failings of his life and body. For a man leading a life absent of both love and eyesight, he is incredibly funny. He opens the line of his most recent book with "Whenever I hear the word 'spiritual,' I reach for my revolver" (Knipfel)

While Mr. Knipfel's particular brand of humor seemed too dark for the purposes of this piece, I attempted to create a sense of humor in these scenes that held some degree of sadistic undertone.

## V. Second Draft Revision and Development



## A) Format

In the major revision of the previous draft, the non-linear manner of narrative was retained, but heavily rearranged to smooth the previously listed transitions and to streamline the major scenes of the story. The two most notable changes in format in the second draft are the absences of two significant passages from the previous draft.

The first of these is the dream immediately after Chris is asked to visit Webb, before Patrick wakes to his Son's pranks. The purpose of the scene was to create a passage where Patrick briefly realizes his actions as a child were fueled by a specific adolescent angst, and then wakes to find that he was victim of the same type of inner conflict. Reading over the passage, I felt the entire passage was unconvincing. The transition into a dream state was abrupt, and the material in the dream read in a bland and unconvincing manner. Also I purposely did not take advantage of the creative freedoms allowed by a dream sequence, nor did I want them. I found the overall worth of the dream to be minimal, so it was deleted in favor of blank space to be filled at a later time with more substantial material.

The second deletion eliminated an entire third of the first draft. Starting with the introduction of Drew Campbell and ending with the last lines of the piece, the entire flashback account of Patrick/Pip's senior mischief was cut from the story. The passage was intended to suddenly and completely reground Patrick in the past as Pip, but served this purpose very poorly. The perspective of the story was dominated by the perspective of Drew Campbell, who is introduced only a few lines before his narrative. The content of his flashback clashed with the muted resentment and passive-aggression used in the rest of the story. While this was done intentionally to emphasize the disjunction in

Patrick's former and present life, the manner in which the flashback was presented and its length diminished the effect; any meaningful juxtaposition or conclusion was lost as the flashback became its own piece and wholly overtook the rest of the story.

Additionally, I realized after I had written the passage that aspects of Drew's account were simply too related to actual events in my own life. As such, the passage defeated my intention to write something entirely synthetic and had to be absent in the second draft.

#### B) Conflict/Character

With the deletion of a major portion of the first draft came several changes to the presence and actions of characters in the story. Drew Campbell was eliminated for many of the same reasons his narrative account was. The development of Patrick was lost in the length and dominant presence of the flashback. When it was eliminated, I found that the presence of Drew Campbell in the story served no functional purpose and was thus not written into the next revision.

With such passages and characters removed, I began to work with pieces of the story that other readers had found lacking or underdeveloped. The most significant result was the addition of the absent mother/wife of the Carnate family. After dealing with the overwhelming personality and presence of Drew, I was wary of creating and introducing a new character with too much presence, symbolism, or inherent meaning. This was especially difficult with the missing Carnate, as her absence served as the foundation for much of the tensions between Patrick and Chris.

I chose to introduce her as in recollection as not to have her character actually interact with and disrupt the character dynamics retained in the revised draft. I also decided that her introduction be at a point where both internal and external tensions were high. The scene in the hotel room seemed to be the most appropriate place for this, as Chris argued again about Webb and Patrick prepared to leave him

I placed a limitation on the number of lines I would devote to the absent mother/wife, which proved to make writing about her difficult. The other characters had been developed over the course of the entire story, and I was unsure as to how I could develop her in just a few lines. In end I chose to give the entire Carnate family a passive-aggressive problem solving strategy, as it seemed the best way to derive meaningful action in such a limited amount of space. For her, posted notes appeared to be an adequately passive-aggressive behavior to drive the action forward without overwhelming the story.

With the arrival of the second female character, I was unsure if the role of Theresa had been diminished or not. After examining her role in the first draft, it was concluded that with some small additions to existing passages, her role and meaning in the story could be significantly enhanced. These additions can be seen on page 2, line 17 when it is explained that Theresa's body movements elicit a response in Patrick, in the passage beginning on page 3, line 41 where the reader learns of the nature of the elicited response, and on page 6, line 3 as Patrick realizes how little romantic contact he has in his life. These additions are elaborations on the sexual tension weakly developed in the first draft, and serve as strong definers of Patrick's character with little to no compromise to the steady and professional presence of Theresa.

Another strong element that better defines the character of Patrick is violence, as seen in line 4 of page 14. While striking his son certainly demonstrates that Patrick possesses the capacity for violence, I tried to create the scene in a manner that drew attention to the reasons triggering the action rather than the violence itself. It was my intention to write the scene to emphasize the unrequited affection developed during therapy in the preceding lines.

The scene also better suits the contexts of Chris's subsequent retaliation. His father's actions were unfitting and shocking, and were responded to in turn with a similarly shocking way. It establishes further the passive-aggressive exchange between them, but more importantly it adds depth to Chris's character by demonstrating a creative retaliation, thus substantiating the earlier contexts on page 2. line 35 where it is reported that he is clever.

### C) Setting/Scene

Save for some minor editing to word usage or transitions, the settings and scenes of the second draft were left largely untouched. Once the dream sequence and Drew's narrative was removed, I saw no need for major revisions to time or place.

The introduction of the mother/wife into the piece necessitated the creation of a new scene, but given my self imposed space limitations I did not find that any description outside the notes or refrigerator door (page 5, line 17) useful or necessary for her brief character development.

## VI. Discussion

While in this revision I found the scenes to be somewhat finalized, the last revision still carries a sense that the character development is largely incomplete. The dynamic between Chris and his father has begun to evolve in ways that are unique to these two individuals, but there still remains the potential to develop each character outside the contexts of the father/son relationship in order to substantiate and drive their actions elsewhere in the story.

I believe this to be a consequence of my attempt to create characters that are entirely fictional to me. I do not know these people and as such, I was initially unable to know how each would react in a given situation, and found it difficult to predict how their reactions would change the directions later in the story.

With revision I have only just begun to develop a sense of who these people are as characters and how these individuals will react in a given situation. For instance, Patrick's motives in going to therapy are no longer purely for the sake of Chris, as evidenced by his ponderings and his violent reaction when his son trivializes the sessions.

Though I am gaining a fuller sense of these characters and their personalities, I fear that in continuing to deny the story of any deliberate influence from my personal library of people met and situations encountered will prevent the story from developing in a manner in ways that increases the width and breadth of its content and heighten the dramatic value of the piece.

## VII. Conclusion

The writing of this story was a test; after years of writing only technical pieces I felt the need to know to what extent my creative limitations were. Limiting the tools and

resources available to me to those things that were not of my experience proved to be the best manner in which to gauge what these limitations were, and were an effective means to discover how to better conceptualize and use my characters.

First draft for Addendum

1 Patrick Carnate signed up for the eleven o'clock group tour, which was late  
2 enough to see the heat wash across the campus in waves. He stood among the pairs of  
3 parents fanning themselves with fistfuls of pamphlets while a few feet away their  
4 children hung back in groups and took turns kicking the heads off of sagging  
5 chrysanthemums. His own son stood closer to the group and complained as they  
6 marched across the campus, as if something could be done about his situation.

7 When he was younger Patrick spent the better part of his four years here  
8 tormenting the administration of the Webb Academy. As a freshman he memorized every  
9 rule, article, and provision of the school's constitution. By sophomore year he had  
10 defeated thirteen of them, setting an underclass record, and prompting the academy to  
11 pass addendums in conduct, uniform, and fire code.

12 When he first transferred, teachers gently warned that he better learn to follow the  
13 rules. In time they resorted to threats, and hardly a term passed without a demand for his  
14 expulsion. But what punishment was so severe as to deter a boy from his favorite games?  
15 The opportunities were obvious; in a land of the proverbial blind Patrick possessed a  
16 delinquent eye. During his last year a teacher once pulled him aside in the hallway and  
17 calmly told him he was "crafty, even for white trash".

18 It was a good life but a distant one, and it surprised Patrick at how quickly the  
19 sensations and events of that life had been forgotten. When teachers lectured him on  
20 discipline and responsibility, he stared blankly into their faces thought about how you  
21 would lose a bit of your self growing so old and serious. In time he proved himself right.  
22 The angst of high school dissolved with the freedoms of college, and even those happy  
23 had years passed into a whorl of obscurity. Early on he had a wife a wife Chris then a  
24 divorce. In time he gained all the pinnings of responsible adult life, and at thirty nine he  
25 was so dimly aware of the sensations of youth he could only explain them in stammers  
26 and hopelessly inadequate analogies.

27 He held the minor hope that revisiting Webb would help recapture them, but the  
28 group was already being led down the last leg of the tour and he was no closer to  
29 remembering his youth than when the day started. It had been too long. There were too  
30 many distractions. Throughout the tour his thoughts were interrupted by the complaints  
31 of his son. "It's so hot here," Christopher repeated to no one in particular. Each time he  
32 said it he paused to rest his palms on his knees and squint behind his glasses, even  
33 indoors, as if to protect his eyes from an artificial sun.

34 Patrick knew these were loaded actions. His son had way of turning little things  
35 into ordeals, something their family therapist in New Haven called "adaptive  
36 empowerment". She insisted that it was a mistake to engage Chris in these battles, so  
37 instead Patrick counted again the number of years it had been since he had visited his old  
38 school and thought about how hot this part of the country could really get.

39 As the tour passed by a stand of trees, Patrick stopped as a memory stirred in  
40 some distant corner of his mind. He blinked and an image flashed across his mind of boys  
41 yelling and running cockeyed between the trunks half doubled over and drunk with  
42 happiness. A uneasy feeling of weightlessness swirled so hard inside that it seemed as if  
43 he was going to rise and float away from the other parents, but when he turned to see if  
44 anyone else had felt it he was alone. The group had moved on without him.



1 Far ahead Christopher was squinting back at him, his features distorted in the  
2 heat. The moment passed and Patrick suddenly felt like the image refracted through his  
3 son's glasses; a dithery middle aged man staring off into the woods.

4  
5 When the invitation arrived four months ago, Patrick regarded it as he would have  
6 a bank statement or electric bill. The script beneath the green Spartan crest informed him  
7 that he had been missed at his ten year academy reunion and he was now cordially invited  
8 to attend the twentieth.

9 Ten years ago life was too gay or dismal to pay attention to such things. A decade  
10 later and Patrick found himself mulling over logistics. It was a good opportunity to  
11 network. He would have to see about time away from the office and consider the cost to  
12 fly versus drive so far south. There was also his son to consider. No one was there to look  
13 after him while he was gone, so the boy would have to come along too. It was about time,  
14 he thought, that Christopher becomes familiar to the idea of boarding school.

15 "Whose stupid idea was this, Christopher snapped when the suggestion was made  
16 to him to him, "yours or Theresa's?"

17 Theresa was the New Haven therapist he saw once a week. Patrick had monthly  
18 meetings. Visits to her office were the one regularity that Patrick insisted they keep.

19 "Just because I'm not like you don't mean you have to send me away, I'm not  
20 'maladaptive.'" He imitated the quotation gestures Theresa made when making a point.

21 "Please, Chris. It's just a tour. You might actually like it if you try."

22 Patrick had brought the application brochures he had hidden in his desk just in  
23 case. One on top shared the same glossy print as the invitation. It read:

24 "The Webb Academy. Achieving preeminence in the education of boys and securing  
25 their development in to men" XXX autonomy as menXXX forging their autonomy as  
26 men

27 Theresa referred to development as "Apperception Delineation" during one of  
28 their monthly meetings together. She liked to lean forward in her stuffed leather chair  
29 when speaking to him and she used her hands when elaborating a point.

30 "When a child loses as much as Christopher has they reset emotionally. In an  
31 attempt to restore order and regularity, they tend to assume the roles of the adult figures  
32 available to them. Problems arise in their search for autonomy. It's two-fold. They rebel  
33 against these roles while simultaneously adopting them. Classic Reaction-Formation."

34 (Before they had a therapist, Patrick read parenting books when he and  
35 Christopher started having problems. But even after buying a collection that chronicled  
36 toddlers to teens, in that quiet room Theresa's words were still intimidating and  
37 incomprehensible. He felt like the new kid being called to the blackboard, challenged and  
38 overwhelmed.

39 "Chris blames you for his abandonment. It's a defense mechanism he has yet to  
40 break out of. My job is to make sure he's properly adjusted when he does. Your job is to  
41 rebuild his trust. The most important thing right now is for him to be confident that he is  
42 being sent to school for the right reasons. You have to be sure too, dad."

43 He sometimes wondered if any of this was even necessary. According to the  
44 comments scribbled on his report cards Christopher was smart, clever even. He  
45 sometimes wondered if any of this was necessary. According to the comments scribbled

1 on his report cards Christopher was smart, clever even. The therapist claimed that was  
2 part of the problem at home.

3 Unless they needed something or were provoked, the two rarely spoke to each  
4 other. It was easier to assume that they knew what each other was thinking, and as a  
5 result saying anything to each other had become redundant. Theresa had terms for this:  
6 passive-aggression, mind reading, repression. What bothered Patrick most was her  
7 suggestion that these were the qualities that he possessed first, that Christopher was a  
8 reflection of himself.

9 “Fine. It’s not like I have any say in the matter anyway” It was how his son  
10 usually ended an argument—with an accusation

11 Patrick tried to object, but in this case Chris was right. The decision to send him  
12 to Webb had been made a long time ago.

13  
14 When he went to bed that night he dreamt he was back at Webb again, during one  
15 of those rare days the white Georgia sun receded into a smolder. A grey curtain of clouds  
16 rolled in from the hilltops and encompassed everything in a knot of heavy, static air.  
17 Thunder groaned above him. He was fifteen and thin and bored again, wishing he were  
18 done with the academy, freed from the malaise of high school. A life outside was waiting,  
19 swirling about just beyond his reach, and when he couldn’t wait any longer he looked up  
20 to the sky and wished for it to fall upon him like rain.

21 Patrick awoke startled, and was jolted a second time when looked for his alarm  
22 but saw instead a four foot stack of books teetering above on his nightstand. He  
23 scrambled upright in his sheets, blinked hard, then stared blankly at dusty spines of every  
24 parenting book he swore he had boxed away in the attic: “Happy Husband/Happy  
25 Baby,” “How to Love Your Millennium Child”, and inexplicably[curiously], at the top,  
26 “Hot Flash!: A Woman’s Guide to Surviving Menopause.”

27 He flushed with a wave of anger and confusion. Patrick called out for his son, but  
28 there was no reply. He used his palms to rub out the sleep from his eyes, and sat for a  
29 moment in the late morning light trying to draw his world back into focus. Outside he  
30 could hear the drone of his neighbor’s mower, and at the far end of the palisade the Smith  
31 girls were teaching their new retriever to speak and sit and beg. He flopped back into bed  
32 and released a sad half-chuckle at the realization of what Chris had done. The people of  
33 the world outside had gone about its day, bagging clippings and brushing shiny coats,  
34 while inside he and Chris engaged in games they would never have to comprehend.

35  
36 Marietta was the closest city to Webb, and after twenty years it was still a forty  
37 minute drive from the nearest hotel back to the gates of the academy. After lunch Chris  
38 insisted that he get to go to the reunion banquet instead of float around in the pool or  
39 watch TV as planned. Patrick submitted, and as they weaved back across the countryside  
40 in silence, he occupied his mind with thoughts about time and weather for a second time.

41 When they arrived at the reception hall, a valet not much older than Chris handed  
42 them a ticket before stepping into their rented Honda and driving off into the dark. Inside  
43 the walls were draped with green velvet sashes and a string quartet played softly in the  
44 corner. Glasses clinked over murmurs of men standing about in groups of two or three.  
45 Every few minutes laughter erupted from the far end of the room where a pack had  
46 gathered together to swap lies and friendly exaggerations.

Patrick stood uneasily to the side, unrecognized. He started towards the catering table for lack of a more interesting thing to do when a voice called out, "Carnate!"

Both father and son looked up to see a pair of broad shoulders rise from the group at the back of the room. An arm shot up and waved stiffly, and heads turned as the large bald man it was attached to staggered towards them, shouting the entire way.

"By golly I knew that was you! Betcha didn't recognize me with this gut, huh?" For good measure, the man emphasized his point with a hard slap to his belly.

Patrick drew a smile of fake surprise as if the action had jogged his memory.

"How have you been?" The unease he felt in not knowing anyone was now accompanied by the incomplete recollection of the man before him. As kids Drew Campbell was the last to be picked for teams. He was the quiet kid whose hands would sweat whenever he was excited.

Drew jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Remember Johansen don't ya?" Patrick lied and shook his head yes[ it didn't matter when/if he shook his head yes] . "Just scooted his entire operation to Fiji. Who in hell wants to go to Fiji?"

Patrick, for one, did. He suddenly wanted to be anywhere but the reunion and was already searching for excuses to leave. He glanced down at his watch, and then began patting at his coat pockets for lost keys or a misplaced wallet.

Drew continued. "Say, what fox is shakin' your sheets these days?"

The question took Patrick by surprise. The only time he had cried in her office, Theresa leaned over with a delicate hand, and just for a moment, rested it his knee.[ shocked/drew back] It was the closest he had been to a woman since...

"Who's this?" Drew said, noticing Chris for the first time. "So someone got their claws into your old man Pip, huh?"

"Easy, Drew." Patrick started. "You two are more alike than you think."

But he didn't hear him. The man was filled with the warmth of old friends and rye, good natured and uncontrollable. The opportunity to roast a former classmate, in front of his son, was one he would not allow himself to pass up.

"One summer your dad and me almost got into big trouble," the man began, "a week before graduation. We used to hide out behind the chapel when it was hot. Sometimes back next to the woods he would get these notions, and when Pip got a notion you believed him by golly!"

It did not take long for Chris to realize that "Pip" was his father's old nickname, and when he did it became easy to imagine the two, twenty years earlier, among all the places he had seen that day.

Summers at Webb were reserved for ambitious freshman looking to get ahead in their studies, and those lingering seniors who lacked similar foresight in years past. With only a week left, Pip and Drew were restless slaves at the academy [, roommates in a dormitory without air conditioning. ]

When the sticky morning heat made sleeping in and attending class equal insults, Pip and Drew compromised and spent the day lounging in the cool shade of the woods. As the afternoon light began to fail they left to the cafeteria before slipping back toward their room with their coat pockets bulging with food. The objective was to spend the entire day hidden from the eye of the administration, but their game evaporated in front

1 of the conservatory as they crossed paths with their History teacher, the one who had  
2 pulled Pip aside to call him white trash.

3 He began with Drew. "You two were absent from class today."

4 "We were sick. We have a pass from the nurse." said Drew, in a clumsy attempt  
5 to lie. "We left them in our room. "

6 "Well I hope to see them tomorrow then. Wouldn't it be a shame to fall short of  
7 graduation by way of absences?

8 Drew squirmed for a second before Pip jumped in.

9 "Absolutely. It wouldn't do to have two missed graduations marring the  
10 academy's sterling record. Wouldn't it be a shame?"

11 The teacher stiffened. With his bluff dissolved he turned from the grinning Pip  
12 and continued on his way. As he did the two could hear him muttering beneath his breath,  
13 "Real characters those guys. Regular West Side Story."

14 As Pip continued the opposite direction, Drew turned to follow his room mate  
15 with what he imagined to be the cool indifference of a Shark or a Jet. Pip's was  
16 concerned with more important things. His indifference was genuine.

17 When they were out of range, Pip looked back at their teacher retreating in the  
18 failing light and stated, as a matter of fact, "I'm going to go for a drive tonight."

19 The score ceased in Drew's mind as he managed the enormity of the statement.  
20 He would be caught, how would he even get past the gates? Where would he get a  
21 license, or a car for that matter? It sounded so crazy to him. He searched Pip's face for  
22 jest or sarcasm, some sign that he was about to deliver the punch line.

23 "Stay here. I have to make a phone call."

24 Drew nodded and watched as he jogged back to the dormitory. Pip's reputation  
25 was incentive enough that interesting things would happen. He had a four year record of  
26 adventures, and for want of any of his own, Drew stuck around and waited for his return.  
27 When he did there was no discussion or explanation. Pip made his way towards the  
28 woods and Drew followed.

29 They emerged on the other side at the teacher's quarters. With his gut turned to  
30 ice, and his head light and full of intrepid notions, Drew followed his roommate as they  
31 left their trees and began slinking between the rows of cars in the adjacent lot.

32 "Who is picking us up?" he whispered as Pip paused to kneel behind a sedan, too  
33 busy fumbling with something on the undercarriage to answer. Drew listened to the soft  
34 churning in the woods behind him, then wiped the sweat off his palm on his slacks.

35 "*Pip*," he quietly insisted, "who is picking us up?"

36 This time Pip stood up, grinning, and jangled a grimy set of keys next to his cheek  
37 like a bell. He had planned it all out. There would be no need to pry or jimmy. No  
38 breaking of glass. He had only to unlock the doors, blip the choke twice, and twist the  
39 key in the ignition before waking the Detroit underneath the hood. Pip coaxed the  
40 rumbling box out of its slip, down the rows of other cars, and out the gates of the  
41 academy. There was no need to rush. No one had seen them. Back then it was that  
42 simple.

43 Drew sat for some time, his hands soaking through the seats, in quite disbelief.  
44 The night had taken a delinquent turn, and was afraid that in turning with it, something  
45 permanent and inextricable had occurred in him as well. He had taken his life, he thought,  
46 and entrusted it to his room mate behind the wheel.

1           “You have to calm down,” Pip said with some reassurance, “and you have to  
2 enjoy the ride.”

3           The engine burred as the headlights turned upwards, and then groaned as Pip  
4 pressed the accelerator towards the floor. The road began to wind steadily up a ridge, and  
5 after drifting through a sharp right, Pip let off the gas as up ahead two figures came into  
6 view. Drew strained to ahead in dark, and as they grew brighter and larger in the  
7 headlights, the possibilities of the world outside Webb broke open a second time.

8           “Girls!”

9           “Indeed,” Patrick said as they coasted to a stop, “now hop in the back.”

10          Webb had no sister chapter. Woe to the student whose sister or blonde stepmother  
11 came for visits, for they were they butt of jokes and ribbings for weeks afterwards.

12          Drew stepped out of the car and watched as the two figures hobbled towards the  
13 headlights-- studded belts, tanked, hair like spooked cats.

14          The first girl crawled into the front and smacked Pip playfully with her purse.

15          “We’ve been waiting all night for you two.”

16          Her friend, looking like she had been dragged out of a pleasant dream, plopped in  
17 the back next to Chris and said nothing.

18          Pip put the car through its paces up the ridge, joking and laughing with the first  
19 girl while the couple in the back seat sat looked out opposite windows with the sad  
20 expression of newly weaned pups. They turned into wide shoulder at the top, and the girls  
21 tired to protect their hair as the car rocked and bumped over rocks and branches before  
22 lurching to a stop.

23          They had risen above the tree line of the gulch below, and over the hood of the car  
24 they could see the entire valley opened up before them.

25          “Perfect.”

26          The day was a game he played masterfully. He reviewed each play in his mind  
27 with satisfaction, and now, atop a ridge with air as soft as a hand on the cheek, there was  
28 only one way to consummate his victory.

29          Even the sad girl began to let her hand wander across the seat towards Drew. The  
30 first girl was less tentative, and there was no need for delay. Seatbelts clinked as they  
31 were shoved out of the way, as the two couples moved towards the obvious conclusion to  
32 their night.

33          But the atmosphere shattered as Drew shot up in his seat.

34          “I hear someone coming”

35          His companion soured again and the girl in the front asked, “the fuzz?”

36          She tried to rephrase when he didn’t answer. “The fuzz. Cops. The police.”

37          He looked at with no comprehension, as if the added information was a secret  
38 language. His realm of punishment and authority extended only as far as the walls of the  
39 academy, and he was now trying to accommodate the realization that his crime was  
40 subject to a less forgiving collection of laws.

41          “I can hear it” someone said “just drive off, Pip”

42          The other car was already carving up the ridge. Its headlights reaching behind  
43 them with every turn.

44          “Too late,” he replied, revealing nothing of panic or inner terror, “everyone out.”

1 All four spilled from the car as if it were about to explode. Hearts beat madly as if  
2 spinning in the wrong gear as they watched the headlights of their accuser carved up the  
3 last turns up the road.

4 Desperate eyes turned toward Pip for a solution, a way out, and in a word, he  
5 delivered one.

6 “Push.”

7 Instantly all four heaved against the trunk and toppled onto their hands and knees  
8 as the car lurched forward with little resistance. It picked up speed for a moment,  
9 jounced, and then illuminated their faces once, twice, three times as it slipped end over  
10 end into the valley.

11 The other car crested the ridge, passed them, and then continued back down the  
12 ridge.

13  
14 “It was the greatest thing...”

15 The string quartet began another sonata, and pairs of men still lingered about the  
16 reception hall exchanging cards and numbers.

17 Even before Drew began Patrick had wanted to leave, and now that he was  
18 finished he had made up his mind to go. He resented this place, and regretted deeply that  
19 he didn’t ceremoniously tear the reunion invitation to ribbons as he promised himself  
20 decades ago. He looked to Chris to express that it was time to go, but the man was  
21 holding him fast with one of his sweaty palms, concluding,”.. the greatest goddamn thing  
22 ever.”

23 They waited outside for the valet to arrive, in silence, but this time Patrick  
24 couldn’t distract himself with empty reminiscing. Hidden faces, episodes, entire lives  
25 burst from repressed corners of his mind, and with them, realizations of the failures he  
26 had along the way, of what his life had failed to become, and of how incompetent he felt  
27 around his son.

28 As he burned through the night he realized he understood some of what his wife  
29 felt before she left. Even after so many years parenting was still uncomfortable. How to  
30 show disapproval or pass off your own mistakes as wisdom, these were exercises he had  
31 never planned for, had never expected to take on. This situation, even this car, he  
32 realized, were not his, were why he carried the flat affect of a man living a life that was  
33 not his own.

34 The valet brought back their rental with the windows down and the radio on.  
35 Patrick wasted no time leaving the campus. No tip, second gear, and through the gates  
36 again.

Revised Draft for Addendum

1       The group tour started at eleven, which already was late enough in the day to see  
2 the summer heat rise over the campus in waves. Pairs of parents fanned themselves with  
3 fistfuls of pamphlets as their guide marched them across the grounds. Finding shade  
4 wherever they could, their kids hung back in clusters a few feet away. Patrick Carnate  
5 stood amongst the adults with his arms crossed, and tried to look interested in front of  
6 Chris. It was important, he remembered, that his son get a feel for the place, that he  
7 become excited about coming here.

8       As if on cue their guide went into her pitch as soon as they reached the apex of the  
9 great lawn.

10       “What distinguishes the Webb education is our emphasis on the individual. The  
11 life of every boy here is a unique part of the Webb experience, and when they leave here  
12 they do so with the proper tools to become leaders in whatever fields they choose to  
13 enter. This was our founder’s great intent. It is part of our legacy.”

14       The guide clasped her hands together and paused for effect, as fifteen parents and  
15 their sons soaked through the collars of their polos.

16       As they started off to a new location, the adults walked ahead and the kids  
17 reformed their group a few yards back. Chris Carnate broke rank and walked between the  
18 two, showing allegiance to neither. He did not care about what the guide had to offer  
19 ahead, and refused to join the lagging group as took turns kicking the heads off of  
20 sagging chrysanthemums, making friends. He kept his buffer, complaining loudly as if  
21 something could be done about his situation.

22       “I don’t understand why you’re doing this,” he told his father earlier, “I don’t  
23 want to be here.”

24       Patrick took a deep breath, then replied, “It’s not a matter of wanting, Chris.”

25       “Fine, I don’t *need* to be here.”

26       Their entire morning had been a series of similar pushes and pulls. Whenever  
27 their guide asked the group for questions, Chris stopped to rest his palms on his knees  
28 and squint a little, even indoors, as if to protect his eyes from an artificial sun.

29       “It’s so hot down here.”

30       Their therapist in New Haven had taught Patrick how to recognize the little  
31 battles, something she called “adaptive empowerment”. It was Chris’s way of turning  
32 small things into ordeals. She insisted it was a mistake to indulge his son in these  
33 arguments, so Patrick instead counted the number of years since he had been back to the  
34 academy and thought about how hot this part of the country could really get. It was the  
35 way he had begun to handle their arguments over the past few months.

36       When the invitation arrived in January, Patrick opened it with the same regard he  
37 would have for a bank statement or electric bill. The script beneath the green Spartan  
38 crest informed that he was missed at his ten year reunion, and that he was cordially  
39 invited to attend his twentieth. Stapled to the RSVP card was a donation slip.

40       Ten years ago life was too gay or dismal to pay attention to such things. Now  
41 Patrick considered the networking opportunities—logistics.

42       He would have request time away from the office, and consider the cost to fly  
43 versus drive so far south. And there was Chris to consider. There was no one to take care  
44 of him while he was gone, so he would have to come along too.

45       It was about time anyway, Patrick thought, that he became familiar with the idea  
46 of boarding school.



1           “Whose stupid idea was this,” Chris snapped when it was suggested to him,  
2           “yours or Theresa’s?”

3           Theresa was the therapist in New Haven Chris saw twice a week after school.  
4           Patrick had monthly meetings. It was the one regularity he insisted they keep.

5           “You know, you don’t have to send me away. I’m not ‘maladaptive.’” He imitated  
6           the quotation gestures Theresa often made during their sessions.

7           “Don’t drag me down there just because you want to rub elbows with your dumb  
8           friends.”

9           Patrick had brought the glossy brochures he kept in his desk for this occasion. The  
10          one on top shared the same glossy script as the invitation. It read:

11  
12         “The Webb Academy. Achieving preeminence in the education of boys; securing their  
13         autonomy as men.”

14  
15         Autonomy was something Theresa called “apperception” during their sessions.  
16         She had the habit of using her hands to emphasize a point and she liked to lean forward in  
17         her stuffed leather chair when listening to Patrick speak. It bothered him that sometimes  
18         she leaned so close he could make out heart beats between the slender recesses of her  
19         neck.

20         *“When a child loses as much as Chris has, they reset emotionally. In an attempt to*  
21         *maintain a sense of order and regularity, they tend to assume the roles of the dominant*  
22         *adult figures around them. It is during their search for autonomy where problems arise.*  
23         *They adopt these roles while simultaneously rebelling against them. Classic reaction-*  
24         *formation”*

25         Patrick was familiar with all of these terms. Before they had a therapist, he tried  
26         parenting books when he and Chris started having problems. But even after collecting a  
27         library covering toddlers to teens, Theresa’s words were still intimidating and  
28         incomprehensible. During their first meeting he felt like the new kid being called to the  
29         front of class, her words like problems on the blackboard.

30         “Chris blames you for his sense of abandonment. It is a defense mechanism he  
31         has yet to break out of. Our job is to make sure he’s properly adjusted when he does.”

32         Patrick sometimes wondered if any of this was necessary. In a general sense there  
33         was no cause for alarm. His son wasn’t a typical problem child he had read about in  
34         books, fifteen year olds who held arrest records or tortured cats. He didn’t cause trouble  
35         at school. According to his teachers Chris was bright, clever even.

36         It was the times they were alone that bothered Patrick. How to show disapproval,  
37         or pass off his own mistakes as wisdom: these were events he had never planned for, was  
38         never completely able to avoid. Unless they needed something or were provoked, they  
39         rarely spoke to each other at home. It was an easier routine to assume they knew what the  
40         other was thinking, and as a result, saying much of anything to each other had become  
41         redundant.

42         Theresa had terms for all of this: mind reading, avoidance, regression. What  
43         bothered Patrick most was her suggestion that these were qualities he possessed first, that  
44         Chris’s actions were reflections of his own.

45         “I want you to try to remember what it was like to be that age.”

1           He tried to keep her words in mind with a minor hope to fill a twenty year  
2 absence before the night's reunion. But the guide was already weaving her presentation  
3 back into the present and he felt no closer to remembering his youth than when the tour  
4 had begun.

5           As the group re-crossed the lawn he paused for a minute, trying hard to  
6 remember, as if focusing would help him realize what was not there. Once there was a  
7 brief movement, some uneasy stirring of the past, when Patrick regained an idea of what  
8 his life was like there. But when he looked up to see if anyone had else had felt it he  
9 found that he was alone. The tour had moved on without him.

10           Far ahead he could see Chris squinting back at him, his features distorted  
11 through the heat. The moment passed and Patrick suddenly felt like the image refracted  
12 through his son's glasses, an embarrassed middle-aged man staring blankly into his past.

13  
14           Patrick's inability to recall the events of his youth was not for lack of having  
15 them. As a student he spent the better part of four years tormenting the administration of  
16 the Webb. As a freshman he memorized every rule, article, and provision of the school's  
17 constitution. By sophomore year he had broken thirteen of them, setting an underclass  
18 record and prompting the administration to pass addendums in conduct, uniform, and fire  
19 code.

20           In the atmosphere of the academy Patrick was a curiosity not because of the  
21 suspicions that his background was working class, but because his actions revealed  
22 nothing to deny them. Among the son's of senators and entrepreneurs he carried a life  
23 outside of Webb on his sleeve. Younger boys cleaved to his mystery and the older ones  
24 appreciated the novelty of his presence. His knowledge of dirty jokes was profound.

25           Initially teachers chided him with warnings that he better learn to follow the rules.  
26 In time they resorted to threats, and hardly a term passed without a demand for his  
27 expulsion. But what reprimand was so severe as to deter a boy from his favorite game?  
28 What punishment was there for merely avoiding the rules? As graduation, a classmate  
29 pulled him aside to tell him he was "crafty, even for trash," as congratulations.

30           It was a good life, but a distant one, and it surprised Patrick at how quickly the  
31 sensations and events of that time had been forgotten. At Webb, when being lectured  
32 about responsibility or discipline, he used to stare carefully into his accuser's face and  
33 wondered if people lost a bit of themselves growing so old and serious. Eventually he  
34 found out. The angst of grade school dissolved with the allowances of college, and even  
35 those happy years had passed into obscurity. After school he found an adequate career.  
36 With marriage came a family, and in time Patrick had collected all the pinnings of  
37 professional adult life.

38           To have come so far from his origins was some source of pride for Patrick, but at  
39 thirty-nine he was so dimly aware of what those beginnings were he could only explain  
40 them in stammers and hopelessly inadequate analogies.

41           When these issues came up during his first sessions, Patrick tried to steer the  
42 focus back towards Chris or paid more attention to Theresa than to what she had to say.  
43 In her late twenties and fresh out of Yale, she had only recently found a group to practice  
44 with. Seated before her, Patrick wondered what kind of friends she made in school, if she  
45 had already met people in New Haven, or if at night she returned to an empty house. The  
46 way she pulled her hair back with the hook of her little finger made her seem too young,

for him at least, to give advice about raising a son. He liked to think of what she would have thought of him under different circumstances, a different time without the issues of Chris to come between them. He found that when he listened just to the tones of her voice, even her scariest words landed as soft as a hand on the cheek.

“Chris needs to be confident that he is being sent to school for the right reasons. It would help if you were too.”

Atop a throne of stuffed patent leather, she spoke with a professional authority that reminded him why he was there, but sometimes it did not keep him from leaving the room with the sad resentment of a newly weaned pup.

“Did you have a breakthrough?” Chris once jeered as his father entered from the long hallway into the waiting room, “do you guys make cushion forts and play battleship too?”

Patrick glanced over his shoulder to see if the receptionist was paying attention, then gave Chris a sharp smack across the face.

“Look at me, Chris. This isn’t a joke.”

The next morning he woke to the wail of an alarm. He groped around his nightstand to silence his clock, and was jolted a second time as his hand bumped into something stacked on his nightstand, sending it into a dizzy teeter over his head. He scrambled upright in his sheets, blinked hard, and stared blankly at the four foot column of old books, making out the titles as their yellow spines settled back into alignment. *The Ten Commandments of Good Parents, Loving Your Spirited Child*, and curiously, at the top, *Hot Flash!: A Man’s Guide to Surviving Menopause*.

Flushed with anger and confusion, Patrick called for his son but there was only the silence of an empty house. He rubbed out the sleep in his eyes with his palms, and then sat in the late morning light trying to bring his world into focus. Next door he could hear the drone of his neighbor’s mower and at the far end of the palisade the Harrison girls were teaching their new retriever to speak and sit and beg. Patrick flopped backwards onto his bed and half chuckled at the realization of Chris had done. The world outside had gone about its day bagging clippings and brushing shiny coats while in here, he and his son played games they would never have to comprehend.

Marietta was the closest city to Webb, and after two decades of development it was still a forty minute drive over rolling Georgia countryside to the nearest hotel. The sun had just begun its long decent when Patrick and Chris returned from the academy, casting a flat pink light across the hilltops. It gave the impression they were all about to burst into flame.

At the hotel, Chris refused suggestions that he order pay-per-view or float around in the pool while his father was out, choosing instead to sit on his side of the room and argue his case, refusing to give up.

“I just want to let you know I really hate it there.”

Patrick was in the bathroom preparing for the reunion. His mind was on the graduated class assembling back at the academy. After all these years, he thought, they were an untapped resource. He shook out a razor beneath the faucet and replied, “Please, Chris. You have to think about your future.” He paused for a moment to consider his own and then continued, “you have to think about the opportunities.”

“If it means going there, I don’t want them.” Chris replied.

1           His father walked from the bathroom wiping off the thin streaks of shaving cream  
2 that lined his face, and then walked towards his bags. Chris was sitting on the corner  
3 mattress with his arms crossed, hands buried knuckle-deep into his armpits. It was a habit  
4 that he had not outgrown since his mother had gone. For all their fighting, Patrick was  
5 almost glad when his son was like this; it made him seem more like a normal fifteen year  
6 old and less of an opponent.

7           He selected a clean shirt and tie, brushed his shoes, then unpacked the box of  
8 business cards he had printed for this occasion.

9           “You’re just doing this to get rid of me.”

10          Patrick sighed as he aligned the edges of his cards on the table.

11          “Chris, if I wanted to get rid of you, I sure as hell wouldn’t do it by sending you  
12 to a place like Webb.”

13          Patrick tried to remember if things had ever been different between them, an era  
14 preceding their lifetime’s worth of mutual guilt. Chris came when business was taking  
15 off, when Patrick worked into the night to keep pace with the economic upswing. He  
16 would return home late, after everyone else had gone to bed, to find handwritten notes  
17 taped to the crème textured door of the Frigidare. *“golf with Connely on Sat.” “mom*  
18 *called – doing good” “dinner in the microwave”*

19          It was a routine that was kept alive for several years after Chris was born, and it  
20 suited Patrick just fine until one day, when work ended early, he came home to find an  
21 empty house through and through. Chris was only seven, still at school. In the kitchen,  
22 like a soft paper whisper, a note: *“I can’t live this life anymore.”*

23          In the corner of the hotel mirror, Patrick saw Chris sitting behind him on the bed,  
24 and saw that they shared the same expression, the flat affect of people who lived lives  
25 that were not their own.

26          “Whatever. It’s not like I have a say in the matter anyway.”

27          Patrick glanced back at his son’s reflection and realized he was right; the decision  
28 to send him to Webb had been made long ago.

29          When he pulled up to the reception hall, a valet not much older than Chris handed  
30 him a ticket before stepping into his rental and driving into the falling darkness. Inside  
31 the walls were draped with green velveteen sashes, and a string quartet played over the  
32 soft clinks and murmurs of the room. Every so often muted laughter spilled from the  
33 corner of the hall where a pack of men had gathered to swap lies and friendly  
34 exaggerations.

35          Patrick stood uneasily near the foyer for a few minutes, unrecognized. He stared  
36 walking towards the catering for lack of more interesting things to do when he felt a tap  
37 at his elbow.

38          “Mr. Carnate. Is that you?”

39          It was the secretary of the dean’s office, Ms. Pullman. Although he didn’t  
40 altogether remember why, he recalled her as one of the few adults at Webb he could trust.

41          “Ms. Pullman? You’re still here?” Patrick stammered.

42          “Thirty five years and counting. And by the way, it’s Mrs. Parlier now.”

43          Patrick found the new name fitting. After all these years she was still as thin and  
44 austere as a southern steeple.

45          “What about you? Finally settle down with someone?”

1 Patrick was embarrassed to find himself thinking automatically about Theresa.  
2 Once, when demonstrating some large idea, she leaned forward and, for just a moment,  
3 rested a delicate hand on his knee. He realized that was the closest contact with a woman  
4 since...

5 "I have a son," he blurted out.

6 "Oh! That's wonderful. After all these years I had wondered."

7 The string quartet began another sonata, and the people of the room moved about  
8 the room with casual confidence. The initial unease Patrick felt in not knowing anyone  
9 had been eclipsed by the presence of the woman before him. He resented the place, and  
10 regretted deeply not having torn the invitation to ribbons as he had promised himself he  
11 would twenty years ago.

12 "Oh, I think I see someone over there. It was nice catching up with you."

13 She gave his elbow another polite tap and then he was alone again. A nobody and  
14 a nothing, not even a novelty among his peers. His son is at the hotel and in a way had  
15 already made up his mind about the place, he thought, had already distanced himself, and  
16 here he was still figuring out what he thought of the place. Things were reversed.

17 When he returned to the hotel room with his coat slung over his shoulder, Chris  
18 was still sitting on the bed waiting for him.

19 "Look, Dad. I've been thinking," he started with that rationale only a teenager can  
20 brings to negotiations, "me and Theresa have been making a lot of progress, so maybe I  
21 could go to school back home just for my first year?"

22 Patrick looked at his son as he de-noosed his tie.

23 "Maybe."

24 "Just maybe?" Chris asked, hoping for something concrete.

25 "Maybe." That is all the certainty you will get from me, my son. For that is all we  
26 are born with. That is all we are given to learn to do it ourselves.

27

28