The Road to Excellence

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Abstract

MARSHA clutched her mother’s arm and hesitated in the dining room doorway. She’d hoped to get at a relatively inconspicuous table at the Scholastic Recognition Dinner, but her father was heading right for the speaker’s platform. Her mother sensed what she was thinking and drew her on.
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by Kathleen Hall

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"You don't really mind sitting at the front, do you?" she whispered. "This is no time to be shy. Anyway, you know your father's getting hard of hearing, and he doesn't want to miss anything."

Marsha let herself be guided to a table directly in front of the speaker's platform. The rest of the room quickly filled with chattering people, and in the noise and confusion conversation was impossible. Every student seemed to be accompanied by beaming parents, and here and there were elderly ladies with grandmotherly pride written all over them.

There was a brief hush for the convocation, followed by loud scraping of chairs. Marsha sat across from her parents and thought how nice they looked. Her father had on his best blue suit, and he looked frankly excited. His blue tie matched his eyes perfectly, and his silvery-white hair was combed carefully, with just a little wave in the front. Her mother's hat was new, but the flowered pink dress was familiar.

Student waitresses in dark green uniforms scurried about the room with trays of plates. The funny bubbly feeling inside her made Marsha think she'd never be able to eat a thing, but with the steaming plate in front of her she regained her appetite. The noise in the room was reduced to
a low murmur as people turned their attention from talk to food.

Her mother smiled quietly across the table at her. "We're so proud of you, Dear. But we're not so surprised about this as you seem to be. We knew you'd do your best here like you always have."

Marsha said "thank you," but she had to suppress a little grin. They'd never know how close she'd come to not even being in school. That first quarter had nearly gotten her, and she still shivered when she thought of it. She'd made high school valedictorian without much effort, and for some silly reason she'd expected to sail through four years of college with equal ease.

The first couple of weeks had been great, with an exchange or a hen party almost every night. The third week the blow had fallen, just as she was beginning to feel a little homesick, and the novelty of college life was wearing off. That week she'd failed a math test, gotten a D in a history exam (always her best subject), and had an English theme returned marked "unacceptable." She could still feel the cold terror that had settled over her. She'd kept on writing cheerful letters home, but every minute that she wasn't studying or worrying about classes she'd thought about ways to tell them she had failed. The thought of flunking out and going home to face all her friends had haunted her. There'd been no more parties or dates for her. Every night she sat up late in the parlor and studied math with another frightened girl, and she started getting up at six to review history notes.

Slowly her grades had begun to come up, and by the end of the quarter she had hopes of passing everything, maybe with a C average. It was nothing great, but it sounded good. Then the unbelievable had happened: her math instructor threw out the first exam, the history instructor told her how impressed he was with her improvement and understanding, and she wrote a theme that was good enough to be published in a student magazine.

She'd spent most of her vacation sleeping and getting ready for the next quarter, determined to start out right this time so she could get at least C's and still have some fun.
Then her grade slip had arrived, with a 4-point average. Her parents hadn’t seemed at all surprised; it was just what they had expected of her. She thought about telling them all she’d been through, but there didn’t seem to be any need. They’d just be sorry she’d worried, and they might even think it had been foolish of her.

They told her they were sure she’d do just as well the next quarter, and she had. Back at school again, C’s hadn’t seemed like enough, and she found herself working almost as hard as before. It had all paid off, though, and tonight was to be the grand climax of the year.

The waitress removed the dinner plates and brought frozen squares of pink ice cream. Someone at the next table was smiling at her. It was Sally, from the floor above her. Marsha hadn’t realized she was going to be there, too. She smiled back, and noticed that the gawky boy beside Sally was the one she’d brought to the dorm formal. Marsha hadn’t thought of inviting Mike, and for a moment she was sorry. But it was probably just as well. This was her parents’ big night, and they probably wouldn’t have wanted anyone else along.

She wondered what Mike was doing now. Studying, probably, with his glasses pushed up on his forehead and his feet propped on his desk. He always looked so serious when he was working, but he could change completely in an instant, slamming his book shut and bouncing up to go somewhere or do something. He hated to sit for very long.

They’d met at the beginning of winter quarter. She hadn’t thought she had time for dates, but her roommate had gotten her schedule mixed up and was stuck with two blind coke dates at the same time, so Marsha had taken her place with Mike. She’d liked him at once; there was something relaxing about his casual attitude toward everything, including books and professors. He kept calling and asking her out, and she went whenever she could spare the time from studying. He kidded her sometimes about her grades and the way she worked, saying she was completely out of his class.

Actually he got reasonably good grades himself, but he refused to devote his weekends to studying. Marsha secretly
wondered sometimes if he wasn't a bit lazy, but she liked him in spite of herself, with his slow grin and his gift of making her laugh at her own diligence.

The only time they'd ever had a serious argument was when his house had their spring formal. Marsha had agreed to go and was really looking forward to it, when her geology instructor had announced an exam for eight the morning after it. Mike had really blown up when she'd called to tell him she couldn't make it.

"What do you want to do, blow the top off all the tests ever written?" he'd demanded. "I know grades are important to you, but don't you give a damn about anything else?" She had been too stunned to say anything. "All right, don't talk to me!" he'd shouted, "but look here, Little Miss 4-Point, grades may be everything to you, but I'm not going to sit around and hold your hand while you study. Enjoy yourself Friday night! I intend to!" He slammed the receiver down.

He'd called up the next day, though, and apologized for the way he'd acted. Marsha had told him to forget it, and he said he'd try to be more understanding from then on. "It probably wouldn't hurt my grade point any if I worked like you do," he said, and she couldn't help agreeing, although she didn't say so to him.

He had been more considerate since then. He still called her, but when she didn't have time to go out he didn't make a fuss. It had been a week since she'd talked to him, and she was beginning to miss him a little. She hoped he'd call soon, and they could go out next weekend if she got her term paper finished.

The waitress cleared away the desserts and coffee cups, and everyone turned his chair to face the speakers' platform. Marsha recognized several of the people there: the president and his wife, the registrar, and the Dean. The short man with thinning gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses, sitting next to the president's wife, was apparently the main speaker, Dr. David Harcourt, professor of literature at Brandon University. She settled herself more comfortably in her chair and hoped he wouldn't talk long.

There was a polite spatter of applause as he approached
the podium, notes in hand. He arranged them carefully before him, leaned forward with both hands resting on the podium, and began. "Scholarship students, faculty, staff, parents, and distinguished guests. It is with great pleasure that I speak to you tonight, at what I regard as the most important banquet of the year. Tonight we are placing emphasis on the phase of college life which really deserves it, high scholarship. Scholars are desperately needed today, and you, the students we honor tonight, have a head start on the road to excellence."

Marsha glanced across the table. Her father was leaning forward a little to catch every word, and her mother was equally attentive. Marsha couldn't see anything so interesting about the speech. His first story was the same one the Religion-in-Life speaker last winter had told, but she laughed politely along with everyone else. She and Mike had gone together to hear him, and then they'd sat in the Commons and drunk coffee until almost ten-thirty, discussing what religion really meant. They hadn't agreed about everything, but it had been fun trying to explain to each other how they felt. Then they'd had to run all the way back to the dorm to make hours. The front steps had been crowded with couples, and there had been just time for Mike to kiss her goodnight before the carillon chimed.

She hoped he'd call tonight. It was always fun to talk to him, even when she didn't have time to go out.

"And why do people work hard and do their best?" Dr. Harcourt asked rhetorically. "Because they like it. I don't have to tell any of you that excellence and hard work are virtually inseparable."

No, you certainly don't, Marsha thought rebelliously, so why are you? He talked on, mentioning motivation and self-discipline that got her up at six to study history.

The speaker's voice broke into her thoughts again. "In reality, I'm telling the wrong people all this. Telling our honor students to study is rather like a minister scolding the people who have come to church for being unfaithful."

A polite chuckle swept over the audience. The speaker paused and took a sip of water from the glass beside him. Marsha sighed and glanced at her watch. Eight-fifteen. He'd
already talked twenty minutes, and apparently there was more to come. His speech was dull, and she wished he'd hurry up and finish so they could get on to the awards.

Dr. Harcourt cleared his throat. "Some of you are probably saying to yourselves, 'Well, if he has nothing pertinent to say, why doesn't he sit down and let us get on with it?'" Marsha flushed at having her mind read so accurately and resolved to pay better attention.

"Now I'd like to tell you a little story that Ben Franklin wrote. You'll have to forgive an old English teacher for quoting, but Ben says things much better than I can."

Marsha found herself listening with real interest to the familiar story of the young Philadelphia boy who had spent all his hard-earned money on a fascinating whistle, only to find that it was not worth the price he had paid. When he finished the story he took off his glasses and leaned forward, so that Marsha felt he was looking directly at her.

"I'm not going to draw any of the obvious morals of this story to your attention. I'm sure you can find its meaning for yourselves. You know, better than I can tell you, that learning is a personal and lonely process, calling for hard and ordered concentration. Tonight you will receive certificates of honor for your high scholarship. Just be sure that you haven't paid too much for your whistles."

There was a long moment of silence, and then he stepped back amid loud applause. Marsha's father leaned across the table. "Wasn't that fine?" he said.

Marsha nodded, still thinking about his final words. She felt her mother's thoughtful gaze upon her and smiled automatically. The room quieted again as the Dean stood up to award the certificates. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

Dean Porter spoke a few words of congratulations in his big, booming voice. He was a broad-shouldered man with receding, iron-gray hair. There was a tall pile of white envelopes beside him. He asked the students to come forward, and Marsha's excitement returned. She stood up, smoothing her skirt with one shaky, white-gloved hand, and took her place with the rest of the freshmen, near the end of the line.
The Dean picked up the first envelope, read "James Allen Wilson," and a crew-cut boy in a dark suit went forward. Dean Porter handed him the certificate, shook his hand, and said "Congratulations, Jim." He called each of the following students by name, and Marsha felt a glow of pride in her dean. Maybe by next year she'd know him, too, and he'd call her by name when she got her certificate.

Marsha heard a low mutter behind her. "God! Doesn't he make you sick? That big phony wouldn't know any of us if he ran over us, but he puts on a big buddy act to impress the parents." Suddenly she wanted to walk out, but it was too late. There were only three people ahead of her, and her parents were watching. She had to go through with it now, but never again.

"Martha Anne Palmer." The Dean looked expectantly at her. He had to mean her, so she hurried forward. He thrust the envelope in her left hand, seized her right in a warm, moist grip, and boomed "Congratulations, Martha." His rather watery blue eyes seemed to be focused on something over her head.

She murmured "thank you" and walked carefully back to her chair.

Her father was beaming at her. "Let us see it," he whispered, and she looked down at the envelope in her hand. It was small and square and white. Her name, spelled correctly, was clearly printed in the upper right hand corner. She handed it across the table and tried to smile. Better let them enjoy this night, because she wouldn't be back the next year.

After all, there was no use acting like something tragic had happened. There was plenty of time to make up for the fun she'd missed, and she still had Mike. She'd have to tell him about the whistle. He might laugh a little about how long it had taken her to find out that grades weren't everything, but she wouldn't mind. She could call him when she got back to the dorm. She did owe him sort of an apology, and maybe he'd ask her to go out soon. He'd been awfully understanding all year, but he must have gotten tired of sitting home while she studied. She smiled, thinking of the time she'd have now for long walks around the campus and philosophical discussions over coffee in the Commons. Every-
thing was more fun when Mike was there to share it.

The Dean had finished giving out the certificates, but he still stood by the microphone. "We're not quite done, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "There's one more group we always honor, and that is the parents of our high scholarship students. Will they please stand now?"

Marsha beamed at her parents and joined in the loud applause. She wished she could give them the certificate. It really meant something to them, and it wasn't their fault that she didn't care about it anymore.

The banquet was over, and in the noise and confusion it was impossible for Marsha to do anything but smile and nod "thank you" when she was congratulated. She and her parents worked their way to the door, moving silently with the crowd. "Where's the car?" she mouthed, and her father shouted something about having to park a block south. Marsha took his arm and propelled him to a side stairway.

In the relative quiet she explained that they could just as well go through the Commons. "I'd like to show you the bookstore, anyway," she told her mother.

They walked down the steps and along the wide corridor. Her father put his arm around her shoulder. "We sure are proud of you, Honey."

Marsha squeezed his hand. "I'm proud of both of you, too." There was no need to tell them that she wouldn't get an honor certificate next year. They wouldn't understand, anyway. She led them single file along the edge of the tables toward the bookstore.

Suddenly she stopped and stared at the couple sitting next to the wall. It was Mike, with his glasses pushed up on his forehead and an engaging grin on his face. He must have just said something funny, because the girl was laughing. There was a pile of books on the table between them, but neither of them were paying any attention to them. The girl reached over and took his hand, still laughing. The gesture was easy, as if it had been made many times before.

"Marsha, what's the matter?" her mother asked. "Didn't you hear your father?"

"No, I'm sorry." Marsha turned quickly to them, trying to hide her dismay.
Her father was smiling, his blue eyes bright and proud. “We were real glad to come, Honey, and we’ll be just as proud of you next year.”

Marsha managed a shaky smile. “That’s fine, but you’d better hurry up and get me back to the dorm, or there won’t be any next year. I’ve got a Western Civ test tomorrow and hours of studying left to do.” She turned toward the door again, with her head held high.

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**a matter of words**

*by patricia frey*

*journalism, jr.*

you ask me in what i do believe

green grass in april and snow in december
a white wine bottle empty on the desk
blue shutters on the white-painted house
and san francisco in the summer

is there any more than that
or any more than dogs in high clover
paper sacks crumpled on the sidewalk
a lover’s smooth skin next to yours

if there is then tell me
in your abstract words of joy
and happiness, sadness and grief
and i will ask you a question in return

i ask you in what you do believe