

## ACCEPTANCE

### *Heather Startup*

It is three-thirty in the middle of autumn, and Mike is clearing Lisa's bedding from the sofa. He isn't needed at the hospital until six, and Lisa's on the phone with one of the girls—Rachel, Mike thinks, but with both Rachel and Anna working in law, it can be hard to tell from Lisa's half of the conversation which daughter it is. Rachel's the one with Phillip, and Anna dumped Zach two months ago, but without the mention of male names, Mike is usually lost.

He pulls the pillow from its case and untucks the sheets. Each week Lisa chooses from among the girls' old bedding, and this is the Beauty and the Beast set, with the dancing candelabrum that's grinning so hard its eyes are scrunched shut. Lisa has been coming out to the sofa three or four nights a week to the quiet of the family room, despite the orange glare of the security lamp on the corner of the house. The arrangement makes him feel a mild pang

of guilt followed quickly by resentment that she should make him feel guilty. She could, after all, simply take over the guest room.

The sheets peel away from the cushions, and Mike balls them up. He wants to toss them in the hamper, but Lisa will need them tonight, or tomorrow. She used to say he snored, but now she won't tell him why she sneaks out here in the middle of the night. He doesn't suspect an affair, or anything else. All he knows is that the formerly humorous image of the husband getting kicked out of bed for some minor indiscretion has been reversed, and couples headed for divorce must sleep separately before the beginning of the end. Mike remembers the end of his own parents' marriage, severed only by death according to those who couldn't press their faces against its windows and peer in before the diagnosis. Perhaps more knowledge of what was happening in his father's brain would have smoothed things over, but the forgetfulness and moments of anger piled up before anyone thought to ask if those things were really him. Then he pissed his pants and lost his vocabulary, descending into confusion as everything paradoxically became clearer for everyone who saw him. Mike wondered if he still registered the disgust and pity on the face of the wife whose name he couldn't remember. Mike hired a live-in nurse for his father but really for both of them, to unburden his mother as much as he could. Mike

was ten years younger then, feeling less put upon than needed. He obligingly reminded himself that his time would come too, even as pride descended on him whenever he saw his mother haul her slippers onto the ottoman.

The garage door grumbles open, and Mike starts, dropping the top sheet. He chides himself; Lisa is on the front porch, not parking the car. It isn't her. He shouldn't suddenly feel like a dog that has wet the carpet.

But that means—

"Dad?" Derek's voice reaches him from the back hallway, its usual demanding note stretching the word into two syllables.

Mike is silent. Derek doesn't want to see Mike. He wants to know if his father is home or if he's free to play video games all afternoon. A clomp—Derek's book bag—emanates from the hall, then a sigh. Mike folds the top sheet.

"Dad." Derek is in the doorway between family room and kitchen, a Coke in one hand. His eyebrows have disappeared under his shaggy bangs.

"Hello to you, too," Mike says. "Have you sent that application off?"

Derek's shoulders fall. "Why can't I take more time to make sure everything's as good as I can make it?"

Derek is procrastinating. They both know it.

Mike steps around the sofa. "Duke is your top choice. Why not go for it? You know you're more likely to be picked from the early decision pool." It may be true for early-decision applicants in general, but it is doubly true for Derek. He barely passed chemistry, and his current C+ in calculus makes Mike hope they can smuggle Derek into Duke via early decision before he can bomb the class. Of course, an offer can be rescinded if grades aren't kept up, but a foot in the door is better than waiting outside.

Mike sets the sheets on the overstuffed chair by the couch. Once those forms are filled out, there will be nothing to do but wait, wait and make sure Derek applies to his safety schools. Waiting will be a relief, but waiting is also a barrier between Mike and the empty nest, its absence of children a commendation of his ability to launch them into the world.

"She's just going to put it all back again," Derek says.

"Application," Mike says. "Now."

Lisa will cry for the first couple weeks, he's sure. She'll say things like *All our babies are on their own* and *I never thought it would really happen, you know?* He will wrap his arms around her until she cries herself to sleep. He will carry her to bed, and she will be so exhausted that she will stay asleep through the night no matter what has been bothering her about him. And

when her tears are gone, they will spend their nights at salsa clubs, at restaurants they've never been to, on long walks around their neighborhood. They'll roam the city like they did as newlyweds, without so much as a dog demanding that they come home.

### §

Snow dusts the front yard like the powdered sugar on one of Lisa's bake-sale cakes. If it lasts through the night, the yellowed grass should be covered by morning, and everything that has fallen victim to autumn will be hidden and clean. Tomorrow Mike will take Derek out to clear the driveway, and with both of them working, it shouldn't take more than an hour. Mike stabs a bite of chicken and lifts it to his mouth, glad for the sudden rattle of the heater.

Derek shovels the chicken into his mouth, hardly stopping for a sip of water. His eyes never leave his food, always a sign that something is wrong.

"Do you want seconds, honey?" Lisa asks.

"No thanks, Mom," Derek says, as if he isn't acting like they haven't fed him in a week. Mike knows better than to ask. Asking will only get him a *Jeez, Dad, you're always thinking something's up*. Then Derek, who might have been ready to talk in half an hour, won't tell them anything for three days at best.

“How’s the college process coming along?” Lisa asks. Derek has always allowed her to ask. Maybe, despite Lisa’s well-worn advice about parents picking their battles, Mike has allowed Derek to make the rules more than he should.

“Pretty good, pretty good.” Derek drops his fork, letting it clatter to the plate as he picks up his water glass. With the excuse to stop speaking, he is unhurried as he drinks, moving in slow motion compared to how he was eating a minute ago. He sets down the glass and says nothing else.

“So what’s pretty good?” Mike asks. “Any news?”

“Dad, don’t worry. I’ll tell you when I hear any.”

Lisa puts more salad on her plate. She gestures for Mike to pass her the dressing, and he wonders why she doesn’t ask him for it. Maybe they’ve gotten into the habit of letting Derek silence them.

“Duke is supposed to let you know soon, right?” Mike asks.

Lisa sprinkles more salt on her potatoes.

“Yeah,” Derek says, “but let’s not get our hopes up or anything.”

Mike grunts. “Shouldn’t it be here already, since you sent in the early decision application?”

Derek looks like a wild deer when it’s approached. Mike knows not to move too quickly.

Lisa sets down her fork. “Well, that’s not quite how it works. The decisions go—”

Mike holds up a hand. He has Derek in his sights.

“You didn’t get a rejection already, did you?” Mike pumps his voice full of concern, a concern that is real but feels false.

“I—I didn’t do early decision.”

Mike blinks.

“I didn’t apply to Duke at all.”

Mike scoops up a mouthful of potatoes, mostly to push back whatever he was about to say. He chews slowly, with Derek and Lisa watching him, Derek through downcast eyes and Lisa with her knife paused over the chicken. So. After all the tutoring, all the volunteer hours Mike has managed to get him at the hospital, all the time he and Lisa have spent helping him with homework—too cowardly to apply to Duke. Mike himself was accepted by three Ivy League schools. Lisa met him at Princeton. Rachel and Anna were both accepted by their early-decision universities. Derek can’t even apply to Duke.

“Well, what’s the plan now?” he mumbles as he lifts his glass to his mouth. He takes a long gulp.

“I dunno. There’s always—”

Mike meets Derek's eyes, and Derek stops. His only son is not going to settle for a safety school. That was just to calm Derek's nerves about the application process. It was never an option, just a reassurance that now seems like a debilitating crutch.

"I guess I could apply for regular decision," Derek says.

"You guess?" Mike leans forward again, so far that the back legs of his chair come off the floor. "You've got to *know*, son."

"He knows." Lisa is looking at Derek but talking to Mike. "He'll get it done. When is the regular decision deadline?"

Derek reddens. "Three days."

Mike has never thought about how short three days really is, how little can be accomplished in three days. Seventeen years of raising Derek, and here they are, with only the thinnest veneer of control. For seventeen years, he and Lisa have talked themselves into believing they didn't have two wheels in the air. After this week, the wheels come down, or they all tip over.

"But Duke uses the common application, right?" Mike tries to sound encouraging. "You probably have all your materials assembled anyway."

"All but the essay." Derek is addressing his empty plate. "Something about why I'm interested in going to Duke. It's kind of vague."



“Well, you wouldn’t know passion if it punched you in the face.” Mike is surprised he said it, more surprised at the dead calm in his voice. He expects Lisa to chide him, but she and Derek are silent. Mike tips up his water glass and drains it. When he sets it down, Derek is getting up. Lisa is shaking her head and stabbing at the chicken.

### §

Mike waits until Derek has lost himself in *Call of Duty* and Lisa is reading on the patio. When both appear safely settled in their respective seats, Mike heads upstairs to Derek’s room. The laptop is on the bed, closed and powered down; the sight of it strikes at him like a reproach for what he is about to do. Mike picks it up and goes to his study. Hopefully Derek has charged the laptop enough for Mike to use it without having to sneak back for the power cord.

Mike shuts the door behind him, powers on the laptop, and unfolds his handwritten list of passwords while he waits for the computer to turn on. Lisa thinks it’s overkill to make Derek give them all his passwords. Mike thinks you can never be too careful, and sure enough, his “overprotectiveness” is about to save his son’s ass.

He logs in to Derek’s account in the common application site. A couple of the safety schools use it, and so does Duke. Mike scans the contents. It’s basic

information, nothing Derek could possibly screw up. Mike just needs to send it to Duke.

But there's also the matter of the essay.

Mike clicks the start menu and types "college essay." Several results appear. He clicks the one with the most recent date. It's called "Essay for college - final draft?"

Mike knows the answer to that question in an instant. The essay is a mess. He wants to read the whole thing before considering its chances, but he can't help noticing the mistakes, both overt and subtle. Derek has put *there* for *their*. Mike sees one instance of *there* for *they're*, doubly wrong since contractions, he is sure he has told Derek, aren't appropriate in essays. It looks, too, like Derek has replaced all the semicolons with commas.

But it is even worse than that. The essay says nothing. Derek has chosen the topic—Mike is certain it was Derek's choice—of "My Best Day Ever." It covers the time his seventh-grade art teacher asked him to help design the backdrop for the school play. Mike has no idea this ever happened. He couldn't begin to tell Derek everything that's wrong with this essay—seventh-grade achievements! banal structure! generic title!—and he is sure Derek wouldn't

understand anyway. Derek can't even tell that "My Best Day" says nothing about why he belongs at Duke.

Mike opens a new document and begins typing. He recalls a better best day in Derek's junior year, a day when Derek job shadowed him in the operating room. The morning was slow, and Mike got to introduce him to the nurses and the other doctors who were between cases. He gave Derek a tour of the hospital, something you couldn't get on a standard take-your-child-to-work day when you'd just sit in the corner of an office. They went into an empty operating room, and Mike pointed out everything Derek could possibly want to see: *This is the scalpel. These are the forceps. This is the cardiac monitor.* Derek was quiet at first, looking around the room from under his hair, but then, when Mike held up the oxygen mask, he asked, *Can I hold it?* He touched the circular tube with near reverence and said, *This looks like one of those little inner tubes I used to swim with.* He seemed to really enjoy the rest of the day, looking around more and asking questions. He even watched Mike perform a C-section. Some doctors' kids chose to shadow the procedure right there in the OR, but Mike got Derek set up beforehand in the viewing room. Mike pointed out the trash can and the exit in case Derek couldn't handle the

sight of blood, but Derek just braced himself against the counter instead of rushing out like Mike thought he might.

“...which is why,” Mike finishes typing, “I want to study medicine and why not only would I benefit from four years at Duke, but Duke would benefit from having me as part of its student body.”

### §

Mike’s thoughts aren’t on Duke when the letter comes. The family is preparing an early dinner, and Mike is telling Lisa about the Saturday-night dinner reservations he’s made at the new Cantonese place across town. Mike doesn’t say he hopes Lisa will sleep through the night in their bed, too tired from drinks and the long drive to move out to the couch. Lisa is stirring pasta sauce and absently flipping through envelopes, both hands fluttering between tasks and suddenly going still.

“Derek?” Her voice is strained, and Mike knows. It’s Duke. The envelope looks thick. “Derek, you have some important mail.”

Derek slouches in as if preparing for a firing squad. He takes the envelope. Lisa’s wooden spoon is poised above the sauce. Mike clutches his glass in his hand. No one says anything for a full minute.

“Oh my God. I—I’m in.” When he looks up, shock and exuberance are warring on his face, turning it red as his smile grows. “You guys, I—I got into Duke.”

Lisa screams as if Derek has been awarded a scholarship to Harvard. She throws her arms around him, hitting his bewildered elbows as he tries, too late, to return the hug. Between her exclamations, Mike hears Derek say, “I don’t even remember sending them my application.”

“Of course not! You’ve been so busy.” Lisa squeezes Derek even tighter, perhaps too tight, considering Derek’s face is growing even redder, but no, Derek is looking straight at Mike. His eyes have narrowed. Lisa releases Derek, and he blinks. Whatever Derek was thinking, he’s buried it now.

“Thank you guys so much,” Derek says. His voice is as serious as his face was a second ago. “You’ve done so much for me, helping me get to this point. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

*I know*, Mike thinks. Derek is certainly thinking it too. But Mike has to say something. “Congratulations, son. You really worked hard for this.” He nearly chokes on his words, yet he finds himself relishing a sudden resentment over his half-kept secret.

The long-awaited August day has come and gone. Derek is launched; Mike can breathe again. The evening they get home from Duke, he makes hot chocolate with marshmallows for himself and Lisa. He clutches a mug in each hand, making his way out of the kitchen. Lisa's tears have dried, and now she is just...tired, perhaps tired enough that she won't wake up during the night and move out to the couch. He hopes to set a good tone, to reestablish their relationship as primarily a couple instead of parents, to make the most of what is probably their last milestone until his retirement.

But when he gets to the family room, Lisa is throwing a blanket over the sofa. A sheet is already neatly tucked around the sides, and her pillow from their bed stands at the ready near the arm of the couch, a soldier defending against his protests.

"What are you doing?"

She straightens the blanket, as if she isn't planning to crawl under it in a minute. "I thought I'd sleep out here tonight. I'm usually here by morning anyway." She says it without a trace of resentment in her voice. Mike wishes she would resent it. She doesn't seem to care at all.

"Is it because of Derek?"

He knows it isn't. She doesn't answer, and her silence sounds like she's considering how to phrase The Truth, the reason she's been sneaking out here at night and not telling him why. He wants to remain silent so she will speak, but he can't stop himself: "Is this what you've been waiting for? For Derek to leave so you don't have to make any more pretenses?"

"Well, there was no reason to worry him." She straightens the already-smooth blanket.

Mike is baffled. "What about worrying me?"

Lisa looks up. The skin between her eyebrows is creased. "What do you have to be worried about?"

"Just tell me why you come out here all the time." Exasperation is leaking through in his voice. "Why are you avoiding me? I don't think I'm"—he doesn't know what word to use—"*pressuring*."

Lisa lets out a deliberate sigh, one Mike knows is meant to introduce a lesson rather than release anything like the frustration he is feeling. "This is not about sex, Mike. It's because you snore. That's it. That's really all there is."

She sounds like she has said this before. Mike rummages through his memories of the past year, but he doesn't remember anything about snoring except that she dropped the subject long before now.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I did tell you.” Her unruffled air perturbs him. She sounds like she has gone over this topic again and again—with herself, perhaps with friends—and decided he cannot be argued with rationally. “I told you over a year ago, and you wouldn’t hear it. I don’t like not sleeping in our bed, but I can’t sleep otherwise.”

So this is it: the longsuffering wife has given up talking to her insensitive husband, who is too obtuse to understand what he has put her through. It’s passive aggressive. It’s manipulative. And Mike knows how to call it out.

“So tell me what I can do differently,” he says, “if it’s really just the snoring.”

Another sigh escapes Lisa, but this one is tiny, breathed through slit nostrils, reminding him of a boiling pot of water. “Go to your doctor. See what he says. Maybe you just need to lose weight or cut out alcohol.”

*Or maybe, he knows she is thinking, you need a CPAP, surgery.*

“So you don’t *know* what you want.” He works to keep his voice even. “Is it the drinking, is it my weight—and what, twenty pounds, fifty—”

“Mike.” She holds up a hand. “See your doctor.”

She isn’t speaking, isn’t blinking, isn’t turning away. She is waiting.



Maybe he should see his doctor. Plenty of people see doctors; he wouldn't have a job if they didn't. He tries to imagine himself on the other end of the doctor-patient relationship, this time for more than a routine physical, without the tools and knowledge and power. He sees only a man clothed in puke green scrubs, freakishly elongated because Mike is looking up at him from an examining table. Mike picks up the mugs and takes them back to the kitchen, where he dumps their contents down the disposal. The hot chocolate was getting cool anyway, and the once-taut marshmallows were dissolving into soft, slack blobs.

## §

It is the end of October, and Mike has lost ten pounds. Lisa hasn't noticed, or if she has, she hasn't mentioned it. Nor has she altered her nightly routine. Mike wonders if he can learn not to think about it as he strips the bedding from the couch. After all, he and Lisa have the house all to themselves, for the rest of their lives, and really, that was what he was looking forward to since the girls moved out. He wads up the sheets and blanket and tosses the whole bundle onto the armchair just before the phone rings.

Lisa is out. Mike picks up.

"Dad?"

Mike almost drops the receiver. He has gotten into the habit of letting Lisa answer on Mondays, when Derek usually calls. He chats with Lisa for half an hour before Mike picks up to see how things are going, make sure Derek is studying, talk about his grades. They're done before football comes on.

Today is a Wednesday.

"Put Mom on too," Derek says.

Mike looks up, desperately, willing Lisa to appear in the kitchen. "She's not here."

A terrified silence hangs between them.

"I saw my advisor today." Derek's voice sounds like a violin string about to snap. "If I don't ace at least three of my finals, they're putting me on academic probation."

Mike leans back. He wants to rewind the last ten seconds and not pick up the phone. He is supposed to be done now—done raising kids, done with the college drama—and here he is again, only now he's parenting an adult hundreds of miles away, an adult who's been bullshitting his father for two months. Derek is supposed to be launched now, flown the coop, on his own, but he's still the same kid Mike foisted on Duke.

Should he have done it?

It doesn't matter now. His son is still on the line. He has to say something.

"Probation." Mike clears his throat. "That's serious."

"I know." Derek sounds impatient, cornered. "Dad, what do I do?"

Mike taps his fingers on the counter. *Man up and take college seriously*, he wants to say. "There's not much I can do at this point. Now it's about what you do."

"I know, Dad. That's what I'm saying. It's just that I don't know what to do."

Mike clenches his jaw. "You take your finals. You get those A's you need, you learn from your mistakes, and you move on. What else do you need to know?" He runs through the list of what he should make sure Derek is doing: studying, going to office hours, getting a tutor, and (most of all) not partying as much as he knows Derek is capable of. But Derek will just keep insisting he is doing all these things, and Mike will know he is lying.

"I knew I should have waited for Mom," Derek says.

Mike ignores his son's petulance. "Your mom is much more enabling than your old man is. She doesn't like to push you."

"You push too much." Derek's voice has risen. "It had to be medicine. It had to be Duke. It has to be everything you want."

“Well, then.” Mike feels the slow growl creeping out of his throat. “What do you want, son? Please, tell me, what do you want? You never seem to know. You certainly never act like you care. If I didn’t push you, you’d just roll right back down the mountain.”

Mike feels even angrier when he realizes Derek will not understand the reference.

“You’re right.” Derek’s voice wavers. “I don’t know. I don’t have a clue.”

This is what Mike has been waiting to hear, but now that it’s said, it sounds less like an admission than an accusation. His son is transforming his own faults into those of his father, even after Mike has sent his own integrity via uploaded attachment to a better college than a kid like Derek could hope to get into.

“You know what?” Mike says. “Maybe you do have a clue. Maybe you were right, wanting to settle for a community college, stay home when all your friends are moving on. Maybe you still need that kind of structure. Maybe it will help you *find yourself*.” He hasn’t actually heard Derek use that phrase, but he is sure his son has thought it many times, always in accusation.

“Dad”—Mike hates how Derek says *Dad* to play on his sympathies—“I never said I wanted a *community*—”

“But you don’t know what you want,” Mike says, and his voice has a note of finality and triumph that he doesn’t quite feel. “So your mother and I will have to discuss what’s best for you.”

He hangs up. His only son has been partying away his first semester of college, at *Duke* of all places. For a moment Mike wonders if Lisa could see this coming and feels angry with her for not telling him...what? Derek would never mention hookups and keg stands to his *mother*, and she would believe whatever angelic accounts he gave her. No, Mike should have known better. He should have probed further when Derek told him every week that he was studying and keeping up his grades. Now Mike will have to tell Lisa that Derek is failing.

The sheets on the armchair are glaring at him.

Maybe Lisa doesn’t have to find out. Mike goes to his study before he knows what he wants to do. All he knows is that he can spare her the knowledge that their son may not have the future that their daughters have. Maybe he can postpone Derek’s fate until he has had time to adjust to the rigors of university life. Derek is not on probation yet. There is still time, which means there must still be something somebody can do.

Mike opens his email and pulls up the list of Derek's professors; Lisa forwarded it to him shortly after they got home from dropping Derek off. On the university website, Mike finds the professors' office phone numbers. The first on the list is a Dr. Linda Hayes. In the email, a parenthetical note says she teaches Derek's chemistry class. The call goes to voicemail. He feels out of breath but says hello, he is Dr. Michael Harrison, he is calling about his son Derek's performance in her class, would she please call him back at this number at her earliest possible convenience? He leaves the same message on the voicemail of Dr. Herbert Blum, English Composition One.

He is surprised when Dr. Christopher Gonzales, Calculus Two, picks up on the second ring.

"Hi, this is Dr. Michael Harrison"—he has his message memorized and sounds like a telemarketer, even to himself—"and I'm calling about my son Derek's performance in your class."

A second of dead air.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harrison, but by law I can't discuss my students' grades with anyone but them. FERPA restrictions."

Mike hangs up. Maybe it looks suspicious to end the call so abruptly, but he finds it embarrassing to have missed such an obvious hitch in his plan. He

imagines Drs. Hayes and Blum listening to their voicemails. His vision blurs; the professor list dissolves into a sea of black and white.

What was the plan, anyway? To call each professor and beg for Derek to have a second chance, the way Derek often begged him and Lisa when Derek was a child, the way he probably begged his way through high school? Mike is stuck at his computer, powerless to discover his own son's grades. The realization uncoils, slithering around his insides: there is nothing he can do for Derek anymore.

## §

Mike schedules the pickup for six o'clock. Lisa is still out, with friends. By the time she comes home, she will be too tired to notice. At least, Mike hopes so.

At a quarter past six, an old red Toyota with an oversized flatbed rolls into the driveway. Mike rushes out to greet the three men that pile out of the cab. He pumps each hand a little too hard as he looks each man in the eye and grins. Then he leads them inside, saying "just this way, thanks so much, glad you all could come out here on such short notice."

In the family room, the four men circle around the couch.

“This the one?” A man with a sparse blond mustache nods toward it. He can’t be any older than Derek.

Mike nods. “The wife’s redecorating and wants it out of here ASAP.” He pronounces it “a sap.”

When the men are gone, Mike throws the bundled-up sheets and blanket into the wash. Then he pours himself two fingers of Scotch and considers how he will stop Lisa from using the guest bedroom. He dismisses it; he’d have to install a lock, and that seems like too big a gesture, a declaration of war. Besides, Lisa will not want to escalate things further. A couch is temporary, a guest bedroom a permanent relocation. And with the couch gone, there will be nowhere for either of them to hide.

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