“Our goal is to discover that we have always been where we ought to be. Unhappily we make that task exceedingly difficult for ourselves.”

Aldous Huxley
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"I come here today pleased and honored to be speaking to you on this, your day of achievement. You will remember this day always, if for no other reason than ..." if for no other reason than the whole class falls asleep and falls out of their chairs while you continue to babble on and on. Would you just give me my diploma so we can get on with it? Why is there always so much to suffer through at graduation after you've already suffered so much to get there. I think they call it double jeopardy — you get punished no matter what. Pop seems to be enjoying all this, though, and Mom has never looked so happy. Everyone wearing a cap and gown looks pretty — make that really — bored. I'm mostly amazed that I made it this far. Uncle Jim sure would be surprised; he never thought I'd make it through junior high, much less college. He would sit in Pop's chair and blow smoke rings from that nasty cigar and say, "Catherine, you keep your eye on that son of yours and maybe, just maybe, he won't end up in jail. Of course he won't ever be like my son. Did I show you this picture of him? Doesn't he look great in that uniform? He's the team captain this year, you know." Mom would just smile politely and spray some more Lysol every time he turned the other way. I don't know how she put up with him. God knows no one else would. He really was right about me though — I did get off to a pretty shaky start. The only thing I really excelled at in school was dodge ball — fat Melvin Robbins was always an easy target. I wonder whatever happened to Melvin. He's probably 6'2" and working as an aerobics teacher by now if he turned around as much as I did. Mom and Pop were pretty amazed at my high school transformation. With Mom slaving over the algebra book with me most nights, and Julie Kramer helping me out with anatomy on the others, I really started to take an interest in my future beyond next weekend. I actually did my homework, most times anyway, without having to be locked in my room with Pop holding the key hostage until I was done. He did seem to lose more hair during the junior high years than all the others combined. I guess I did him a really big favor by straightening out.

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He has a very uneven head, not one suitable for polishing. My grades were on the way up — C's, then B's, and even some of those ever elusive A's. I was hot. I knew it, my parents knew it, and they made sure that Uncle Jim knew it. Pop would bring out my report cards whenever Uncle Jim brought over baby pictures of his new little princess. She was heir to his son's less than thriving dry cleaning business. My cousin was the team captain turned collar presser — I loved it. But I was destined for greater things, and my parents never let me forget it. "Who was that on the phone — Julie?" Mom said. "Yeah. I'll be back later, okay?" I would respond while trying to slither out before Mom said, "I hope that Macbeth report is finished. You don't pass English and you don't graduate. If you don't graduate, you don't go to Tech with Julie." Then I knew it was over, Mom had ended the conversation for both of us, although I still managed to mutter, "Julie just wanted a pizza, not a diploma," and I was off to bury myself in the works of Mr. Shakespeare, not exactly what I had in mind. The day that the Tech acceptance came my Pop never smiled bigger and no one else in the bridge club could get a word in for all my mom's gabbing about me. I was the wonder child — a gift to parents everywhere. My future was extremely bright. Mine and Julie's, however, was not. Tech sent her that thin piece of mail that screams rejection as soon as the mailbox is opened. She was bound for Georgia, major undecided, doomed. She cried and I made promises, like a vow to go to Athens whenever I could get a ride, and then she cried a little more. That was it. I saw her once, when some guys on my hall went up there for a mixer. Pretty uneventful, actually.

"You are now on the last page of this chapter of your young lives, and will soon begin the next chapter. Find strength and courage in your abilities and know that armed with these, you will not fail." Well, I don't know about that. I felt pretty confident about my abilities, but failure sure was tailing me, and it seemed to catch up with lightning speed. It embraced me very soon after Ma Tech did. Yes, Ma Tech, the mother of all tech students, embraced me, the wonder child, wholeheartedly at first. Soon after, however, she was not so pleased. My roommate, Rich, well Richard really, was a pretty good guy. He was a junior and a little uptight, but with some help from me, that all changed.
Rich and I, along with the rest of our hall, were having a great time. I was caught up in the whirlwind of living in the dorm — no parents, almost no rules, and plenty of new friends to occupy all of my waking hours. Those hours were usually from about noon to 2 a.m., 4 a.m. on weekends, and I was the happiest I'd ever been. Somehow, my grades weren't all that important anymore, and going to class soon began to seem unnecessary. No problem — I'd make it up on the final. One night, after making it past the door at P.J.'s and having more than a few pitchers, Rich and Alex convinced me that stealing the "T" was a great idea and we should go do it right away. It sounded like a great idea to me. Rich was an EE and he was sure that he could disconnect the alarm without any problem. Unfortunately, Rich had adopted my class attendance policy and he had a little trouble with his designated task. We dropped the "T" just as the police drove up, and the clang as it hit the ground along with the flashing blue lights was enough to make even us sober up. I think that was Pop's first real indication that things weren't going so great — when I asked for money for books at the end of the quarter. Well, I had to pay my share of the damages somehow. It was all downhill from there. My finals were all shafts, and I went home for Christmas knowing that failure had finally caught up. Ma Tech was shaking her head — she knew grades were in the mail. "Just what the hell did you do up there for three months?" I can still hear my Pop screaming. "Maybe you should transfer to Georgia and major in cow-milking," was his added insult. He even threatened to invite Uncle Jim over to really put me in my place. I realized I was screwing up, and Pop decided to give me one more chance. I returned to school with my priorities permanently reshaped, knowing I had to be able to stay in my beloved cubicle of freedom — my dorm room. "...and I put it to you, new graduates of this prestigious institute, to invest in this world with your knowledge, guided by your own individual beacons of light that have brought you this far. Although it may sound cliche...," you are a living cliche, buddy. Anyway, it was time to hit the books, to try to fix my 1.1 mistake.
Things went pretty well. I went to class more than I went to bars, and that was a definite improvement. But a guy can get cold and lonely during winter quarter, and that’s when she came into the picture. She was Rachel Williams, the girl with the waterbed. Rachel was a sophomore with her own apartment, her own car, and her own way of helping me relax after a long week of mental gymnastics. So I missed a few of those early morning classes; it was winter and the waterbed was heated. As the days of winter warmed into days of spring, and we had to turn the heater off, I began to realize that it wasn’t just her apartment or her car that I liked — I really cared about Rachel. I was more scared then when I was ten and had my tonsils out, maybe even more than when Pop got those first quarter grades. Rachel sure has been there for me these past four years. When I finally proposed I don’t know who was more shocked: her, my parents, or me. I’ll be paying that ring off for the next fifteen years, but what the hell, she deserves something for sticking it out this long. I must finally be taking some real interest in the future. Imagine me being a self-starter. It truly is amazing. “So take these words I have spoken to you on this day and let them help you in your quest to succeed. The real world awaits you, and you must meet it with open minds and open arms. Thank you for your attention.” Thank God — he’s done. Even Pop was starting to look bored. Now we’re going to get on with it — real life. I hope I get a job — any job that I’ve interviewed for would suit me. It’s like trying to get into college all over again, only this time it’s all up to me. There’s no one to push me anymore, except maybe Rachel, and she’s not the pushing type. Initiative hasn’t been a part of my character for very long, and I’m not quite that comfortable with it yet. I guess that my job prospects do look pretty good, though. Fortunately, I got my act together after that first quarter. Sure, I screwed up a few times, but I’m only graduating two quarters late; not too bad; considering. “Graduates of the College of Industrial Engineering, please stand.” It’s time. It’s time to stand in line again. I’ve been standing in line for the past four years and now I have to stand in line to get out of here. At least now I’m in the correct line, a skill it took me a while to master. Mom’s crying now, but at least it’s because I did something good . . . I hope.