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'Joy! Rapture! I've Got a Brain!'. By Thomas Hallock

I got an e-mail message last spring from my high-school sweetheart. (Let's call her Sara.) Sara was driven as a teenager and, as it turns out, remained so as an adult. She went to Middlebury College, earned a free ride through graduate school, took a Ph.D. in biology, then landed a postdoc at Berkeley. Now she does cancer research for the National Institutes of Health at Emory University Hospital, in Atlanta. She publishes articles that make a difference in this world; she has a house, a husband, and a 3-year-old boy.

All told, a pretty good life.

But the message from Sara also had a slightly sad undercurrent. As a woman in her late 30s, Sara has wrestled with the usual trade-offs between work and parenting. Those sacrifices have stung -- and they are harder felt still because of a sibling rivalry. While Sara took a doctorate at the University of Utah, sister Clara studied at Yale. Sara has the spouse, house, job, and son. Clara has the spouse, the doctorate, the corporate salary, two children, and a small palace in northern New Jersey (compared with Sara's less fashionable ranch-style home in Georgia). Sara wrote that she was jealous of her sister's success for a long time, but has accepted her humble road in life.

Any reasonable person might ask, That's a humble road? But in the town where Sara and I grew up, expectations fostered such feelings of inadequacy. We went to school in Pelham, a wealthy bedroom community just outside New York. The town is two stops by rail from Grand Central Station -- near Manhattan, worlds away from the neighboring Bronx. Daily commuters board the train at this leafy suburb, cut straight through urban blight, then exit through a tunnel to their midtown offices. Back home, the gradations of wealth and class are more subtle. My parents wanted to look successful and, putting pretense over good financial sense, struggled to keep up appearances. Mom was a nurse; Dad was a businessman, although I've always had trouble defining his work exactly. He wore pinstriped suits to the Presbyterian church, and buried unpaid bills in his office. (My father is the only person I have ever known to receive dunning notices from a country club.) Sara's family struggled in their own way: Her father was a physics teacher; her mother insisted on cotillions. It was a world of lawn services and gourmet delis. The result was that one could take the success of others personally.

For me, the pressure hit home during my senior year of high school. The rite of college admissions was approaching, and I was doomed. No one has ever called me brilliant, I was an indifferent student, and the privileges of class would take me only so far. Placement was critical, meanwhile, as it represented a bellweather for one's future success or failure. Nearly all of my classmates were collegebound (a handful went military, found a trade, or joined the mob), and the brighter students in my AP classes got the coveted "fat letter" from Harvard, Yale, Northwestern, or MIT - they cracked the "most selective" tier of Barron's guides. I was off to Dickinson, a liberal-arts college in Pennsylvania that provided me with a perfectly good (if expensive) education. The process of admissions, however, left me feeling exposed. Our local paper, the Pelham Sun, published a list of the schools graduating seniors would attend. That list irked me. What made one's college choice an item for public consumption? With the newspaper lying open on the kitchen counter, I asked my mother what she thought. "It's not an impressive record," she said.

Did my mom mean mine or the list over all? Either way, I didn't feel particularly "impressive." Her pronouncement carried the cold finality of a real-estate appraisal; it felt harsh, but she spoke a truth if you lived in Pelham. In my parents' world, a child's college was as much a status item as

the car one drove. My mom and dad had four teenage children and two automobiles (a Volvo and an aging Datsun wagon). Each child attended college, and with the massive tuition bills came the window decals. Stickers for the three older boys (Virginia Tech, SUNY Binghamton, Dickinson) went on the Datsun. My sister, Elizabeth, earned degrees from Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, however, and her decals graced the Volvo. It became a running joke for my brothers and me: Were we the rusty wagons to Elizabeth's luxury sedan?

I have learned since that I was not alone. One hears similar stories about admissions and status (some scarring, some laughably superficial) in all walks of academe. I had the good fortune to come from a family that paid my way through school -- my parents did not ask whether I would attend college, but which one. My wife, from Birmingham, Ala., had a much tougher row to hoe. She graduated third in her high-school class, only to be shown the job application at a dying steel mill. The first in her family to earn a bachelor's degree, she lived at home and worked full time while taking 12 hours a term. Ten years later, as a secretary's daughter and graduate student in New York City, she wrestled with tuition bills along with snickers about her Southern accent. Now she has a tenure-track job at a research university near the Gulf of Mexico (which is, after all, where every Alabama native wants to be). Where her struggles had been material, mine were mostly psychic (one is hardly denied access by stickers on a Volvo). Still, we share a nagging insecurity -- the feeling that good is never quite good enough. Few academics ever escape the rigmarole of class.

Recently I finished my first book, a project that took almost 10 years to complete, and that has me waxing philosophic about the motives behind scholarly work. More than I care to admit, market values and education status have defined what and why I publish. Like many colleagues, my professional life began with a letter of admission (and others of rejection), and since then I have never stopped applying to college. Where you "did your undergraduate work" fed into graduate programs, then into the scramble for jobs, grant proposals, and affiliations on a conference badge. The only reward for this dogged insecurity, perhaps, has been productivity.

From 1995 (when I took my Ph.D.) to 2003, I revised, rewrote, and again revised my dissertation. I kept working on the book for the usual reasons: a fascination with the subject, the sheer joy of composition, and the pressures of a tight job market. While reading page proofs last summer, however, I came to recognize yet another reason for carrying the project through -- to prove that I could. My private demons were as clear as the words on the printed page. From the introduction (with its unnecessary excursions into literary theory) to the 30 pages of notes runs the implicit claim, I'm not stupid. How many scholars fight similar battles? Ten years of bad academic parties tell me that I'm not the only one. I've suffered through enough pretentious conversations over brie and chardonnay to recognize chronic insecurity in the profession. (What else were we talking about when we were discussing that Kurosawa film no one had seen in a decade, if at all?)

In a 2001 essay in *The New York Review of Books*, "College: The End of the Golden Era," Louis Menand attributed the flood of scholarly writing to supply and demand, the increase in graduate admissions in the liberal arts and the decrease in undergraduate liberal-arts majors. "People go to graduate school most often," he wrote, "in order to acquire the credential they need to get a job teaching college students." They publish out of necessity. He argued that "if (hypothetically) it were suddenly decided that the ability to produce specialized scholarship had no relevance to college teaching ... academic scholarship would pretty much dry up." From an outsider's perspective, the explanation makes sense.

But more than numbers are at work here. The claim that research would "dry up" with some reshuffled credentials misses what motivates many scholars. We write because we want to

belong, because we seek admittance into an academic community. I can see as much in the first article I ever placed, which begins with an implicit case for belonging. In the opening sentence I profess: "We usually are drawn, as literary critics and historians, to the point where language snaps." The article then goes on to explain where language snaps in *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (exaggerating the case, I now think), but that's not my point. What mattered in the sentence was the pronoun, the "we," tellingly deployed before its antecedent. I was fresh out of graduate school, I had credentials, and yes, I wanted a job, but just as strongly, I wanted full participation in scholarly life.

It is in the need for recognition that my professional ambitions and a genteel-class angst come together. I have been writing for self-validation. How many other academics do the same? As I enrolled for my first semester of graduate courses at NYU, I fought back suspicions that the admissions office had made a clerical error. I spent the next three years worrying about the brilliant students who surrounded me -- only to realize later that those classmates harbored dramas of their own. Any graduate program in English is a veritable scrapyard of dashed hopes, staggering triumphs, misplaced anxieties, bizarre daddy relationships, and burnouts. I had two classmates who were dyslexic -- one wrote on Thomas Pynchon, the other on Henry James. Did they specialize in the authors of doorstep novels as a kind of penance? If you read slowly, why not haiku? One friend who never finished toiled under the shadow of his father, who was an Oxford don; a second (writing on restoration drama) struggled with the legacy of her deceased father's Pulitzer Prize and Tony. My tally of close acquaintances with just a chapter left on the dissertation currently stands at four.

The personal drama behind a drive to publish (or the failure to do so) is one of the truths of academic life. When I was in graduate school, thesis advisers agonized over the question, What keeps people from finishing? But the opposite question is just as valid: What motivates those who do? Graduate students typically receive direction in what to write and which critical school to apply; but they rarely consider their own fundamental motivations. Having left mine largely unexamined, I let the marketplace steer my work. Writing for a job led to writing as a job. I harbored the vague hope of a belated climb up the tiers of a Barron's guide through articles on 18th-century American literature.

Now that's a humble road.

Several years back, my mom gave me a Christmas ornament that was modeled after the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*. Each year mom gave her four kids something new to hang on the tree, and in a funny, if somewhat brutal, way, that year's theme made sense. My brother Steve (an engineer) got the Tin Man; Matthew (all talk) was the Cowardly Lion; my sister Elizabeth was Dorothy by default. That left me with the Scarecrow. The joke was an affectionate one (I was an absent-minded professor long before the letters came after my name) and everyone laughed. I swallowed my anger and hung Scarecrow on our tree. The present hit a little close to home. As an academic, I had come to measure one's worth by what an intellect can accomplish. And with the high expectations came the fears that I didn't quite measure up. Scarecrow puts it rather glumly in the movie: "I'm a failure because I haven't got a brain."

Now anyone, at least anyone with a degree, can tell you that *The Wizard of Oz* is about exposing false pretenses, but that is a hard lesson to learn. I recently broke down and checked out the video, only to recognize the obvious -- that the Scarecrow has plenty of smarts; indeed, he is the smartest of the bunch. When it's just him and Dorothy on the yellow brick road, Scarecrow devises his own escape from the cornfield, and in a frightful scene (that I must have repressed since childhood), he tricks a snarling, surly tree into giving up its apples. When the Wicked Witch covers

the field outside Emerald City with sleep-inducing poppies, Scarecrow spurs the group into action before inertia can overcome them. He has the plan to rescue Dorothy from the witch's castle, and it is the quick-thinking Scarecrow who takes Tin Man's ax to a chandelier cord, causing the fixture to drop and scatter a battalion of guards. The evidence becomes incontrovertible, leading the story to its logical denouement. When the four friends (and Toto) return to Emerald City, the sham Wizard assures them that intelligence is overvalued: "Why, anybody can have a brain. That's a very mediocre commodity." Nonetheless, the Wizard presents Scarecrow with a degree -- a Th.D., or Doctor of Thinkology, from the eminent seat of higher learning, Universita Committeeatum E Pluribus Unum.

It is perhaps the most famous diploma ever conferred. And with good reason -- not because doctorates usually go to straw-headed candidates, but for the way that the diploma compensated for a perceived shortcoming. My own introduction to academic life suggested that, no matter how much I accomplished, good would never be good enough, that maybe if I were a little smarter I would have gone to a better college. I carried those doubts through graduate school and tried to publish them away.

I know a little bit better now. The doubts never go away, but it's OK, because I'm at home, awake, looking up at the people I know and love.

Still, it seems so real, becoming a doctor of thinkology. How many other academics have also visited that terrifying, seductive land of doubt and validation?

I remember that some of it wasn't very nice, but most of it was beautiful.

And you -- and you -- and you -- and you were there.

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