

Adding Apples and Oranges

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I walked down the stairs of Devlin 008, I slipping my calculator and pencil into my backpack. It would be a long time before I would have to worry about derivatives, integrals, and every other fancy function found in my behemoth of a calculator. I handed the hefty final exam to my professor and stepped out into the chilly, damp December night. Completing the two and a half hour exam had lifted an enormous weight off of my chest: my calculus requirement. I returned to my room, threw my bag on the ground, and joyously celebrated the completion of my first semester at Boston College. Later, my phone awoke with the buzz of a text message. My dad had texted me, “Hey Dude!!!!!! Excited to come home!? Can’t wait to see you!” I pocketed my phone and continued gathering my things to go home. I said goodbye to my friends for a long month at home and headed for the train station.

Sitting in South Station, I obsessively checked the clock to ensure I wouldn’t miss my train. I went for another time check, and I received another text from my dad. It read: “Jake and Matt keep asking when you are getting home. They want to see you!” Great, I thought, my relaxing vacation is already going to be interrupted.

When I arrived home, my dad gave me a call to schedule dinner for the upcoming Thursday, around seven p.m. Since my parents’ divorce, I had seen my dad about one night a week for dinner and stayed at his house every other weekend. He remarried, had two sons (Jake and Matt), while I got busier with school and work. Soon I saw him less and less. This

eventually led to a ritualistic dinner on Thursday nights, typically to Chili's. Jake and Matt would often accompany us, as they always seemed to enjoy the extra company.

Thursday night arrived. When my dad's car pulled in the driveway, I hopped in the passenger seat and said hi to Jake, seated in the middle of the second row. Before my dad began backing out of the driveway, Jake yelled, "Daddy! I need to tell you something."

"What is it, Jakey?" my dad responded. Jake leaned as far over as his tightly fastened harness would allow and whispered a few words to our dad. His whispering was not the most subtle.

"Jake would like you to sit with him," my dad said to me in a lower voice. My hand was already on the handle and the sound of the door opening muffled my low sigh.

I squeezed into the tight quarters, sandwiched between the car seat and the rear door. The plastic dug sharply into my elbow. Before I could get my headphones over my ears, Jake insisted we play "I-Spy" on the drive to Chili's. I complied well aware of the implications of not doing so, with only a touch of bitterness when I called out, "I spy something green." Jake would instantly respond, "Tree. Grass. Bush. Street sign." He waited for positive affirmation and then reminded me I needed to say, "I spy with my little eye..."

We pulled into the parking lot and walked towards the restaurant. Jake requested a piggyback ride from Daddy, and Daddy hoisted him up. My dad asked about school, grades, and what I was up to over the break. Terse responses flew from my mouth without interrupting my text message in progress. The three of us entered into the friendly chain-restaurant and we were seated immediately at a small table in the back. Jake sat across from me, with my dad to his right. My eyes scanned the decorative memorabilia cluttering the walls. My dad took a deep breath to signal he was about to talk. He started conversation by telling me that Melanie, my

stepmom and his current wife, was at home with Matt because he had a one-hundred three degree fever. I made a mental note to wash my hands as frequently as possible to ensure I didn't catch the newest edition of the virus.

The waiter handed us our menus and told us he would be right back to take our drink orders. Instead of the typical placemat/sketch paper/children's menu, Jake was handed a coloring booklet with the menu on the back. The waiter had just barely walked out of earshot when Jake came to the realization he had not been given any crayons. Within seconds his cheeks turned beat red, tears flowed down his face, and the squelch of his voice could be heard across the restaurant. I was surprised the hostess didn't bring us crayons immediately after hearing the display. I sat and shook my head. I turned softly to my dad and said, "Hey Dad, now that I'm nineteen, maybe a vasectomy wouldn't be a horrible option."

He chuckled and said, "Oh, you will want kids someday."

"Uh huh," I said, glancing over my menu.

We placed our orders. I got margarita chicken, a Caesar salad, a Coke (also known as "the usual"). I sat sipping my soda, listening to my stomach growl, and watching Jake connect the dots. His squinted eyes, pursed lips, and steady hand showed the focus of a neurosurgeon, yet his artwork was far from Dalí. After he successfully completed the rough sketch of a whale, he turned the page, which contained images such as an apple plus an apple plus an orange and so on. There was also a key for what each fruit represented numerically. Algebraic substitution in a pamphlet meant for toddlers? I knew there were substantial advances in learning ages, but I'd never seen anything like that. Jake struggled immensely in comprehending the page. The frustration built up in his constricting pupils and furrowing brows. He recognized the "+" sign from his kindergarten class, but the "-" was all but a mystery. My dad fumbled the opportunity

to explain to Jake what it all meant. Jake, who was used to mastering any game or puzzle presented to him, began to get cranky.

Frustrated with the situation at hand and irritable with my growing appetite, I took the booklet and drew out a number line. I showed Jake how the plus sign moves one way and the minus sign moves in the opposite. He stared intently at my orange doodles. I thought about the time I was wasting telling him this, but hey, at least he had given up on getting me to play I Spy. Once I had explained that he could simply write the number the fruit stood for directly above it, he began to amaze me. Instantly, he solved problems involving three and four different digits either added or subtracted. Soon, the entire section had numbers at the end of each problem. More impressively, they were all right. Jake begged me to write longer problems for him. Scared to watch him fail, I put it off until I had finished my salad. As soon as the last crouton entered my mouth, he handed me the paper. I composed equations of single digit numbers using addition and subtraction. Each time he would stare intently at the string of digits, move his mouth to shape the numbers, and scribble down an answer: the correct answer. I thought I was in the midst of a practical joke and my dad was feeding him the answers.

It wasn't until my margarita chicken over rice had arrived that it sunk in. I had actually taught him how to do math. Although extremely elementary to me, I had still managed to explain it to a five year old.

During dinner, Jake would often exclaim, "I love math!" or "Danny, you made me a freak!" His excitement as to what he had actually done lent me a sense of personal accomplishment. I hadn't turned him into a freak; I simply uncovered the mind that would certainly become the brightest in his class.

On the walk back to the car, I called Melanie to tell her what had happened at dinner. She was amazed and proud of her son. I made sure my dad would save the Chili's coloring book to show Jake when he got older. That way when he was a mathematics major in college (Boston College?) he would be able to show his friends where he learned how to solve equations. When I returned home, I called all of my friends to tell what had happened. The last person I called was my girlfriend. I told her calmly, and with as few implications as possible, that I had something to tell her. I wanted to have kids. But not right now.