

‘ ‘Graduation Day’ ’

Joseph Mack

a discussion with Abigail

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FIRST DRAFT
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FRED: Peter's father.

ELSIE: Peter's mother.

script consultants: Judy Hutchison, Anoo, Guy, Playground playwrights group, Laura.

From the Cary Playwrights Group: Witold pointed out that it wasn't just Peter who was leaving town, but all the kids (Peter, John, Angela) were going. I've added the line about the ghost-town. Laura suggested that Elsie give her soliloquy spotlight and standing. She also suggested I leave out John if I need to shorten the piece.

 authors notes:

In this piece Fred and Elsie are in their own worlds. Elsie is connected to her feelings, Fred is not. Most of the time they aren't talking to each other; they're talking across each other. It's not that they don't love each other or don't relate. It's just that today their worlds are too far apart. They treat each other with respect and are glad of each other. This is not a marital discord piece.

Some people will see this as just a normal married couple at their kid's high school graduation. Admittedly they will see the mother as being a bit over the top, but men know women are emotional are going to lose it at their children's weddings and on graduation day. They're always back to normal afterwards and you can go fishing again without having to worry about them. This piece is not directed to that sort of audience. If these people don't see what's going on, that's fine with me. I'm not going for laughs either. There is a jolt each time going from Elsie's world to Fred's world. I have to laugh at the gap. I don't laugh because it's funny; it's not. I laugh because the gap is so large and everyone accepts it as normal.

The anguish of Elsie about her son leaving home reminds me of the song "O Danny Boy". This is the complementary situation; a father feeling the loss of his son. It's sung by a father, in Scotland, in anguish over the death of his son, whose life has been cut short, just as he reached adulthood, in a far off land, in a war against people he doesn't know and for who he feels no enmity, for a cause that didn't affect him or his society. I think it's from WWI. I think the father is standing at his son's grave. (I don't know how that's possible, because they wouldn't have brought the son's body back to Scotland.) It's hard for me to see how society can maintain the fiction that men don't have feelings, in the face of the grief felt by the father in this song.

The Cary Playwrights were delighted that Fred was with Elsie, even if in his own way (ie he wasn't snipping at her). They weren't all that upset that he was disconnected

from Elsie (as the Common Ground Playwrights were). Fathers are allowed to be this way; they still coach baseball and soccer just fine. As a result I softened Fred a little bit in this version. I have him more sympathetic to Elsie losing a daughter(-in-law).

The style of the conversation between Fred and Elsie is modelled on a comment in the posting <http://developers.slashdot.org/story/14/06/13/1558209/the-profoundly-weird-gender-specific-roots-of-the-turing-test>

The comments in this posting talk about the problems of a computer that is mimicking a human, trying to differentiate males and females. This comment showed it's not hard.

Computer: Add 34957 to 70764.

Female: Don't you ever say "Hello"?

Male: What does this have to do with being a woman?

The part with the mother talking to the son in his bed, about Angela was spliced together from

o my son and his high school gf broke up when he graduated from high school. She was a year behind him and didn't want to spend the next year in anguish, skyping with him in Boston, especially when she didn't know where she was going to college. She actually wound up a year later in Ann Arbor, which I wrote into the sketch. They broke up by rational decision a couple of days before he went to Boston, for his first year in college. My son wasn't real happy about this, but he had to accept his girlfriend's decision. They still keep track of each other 2yrs later.

o the words I had the mother speak to the son were the words I used on myself when my partner of 25 yrs left. The conventional wisdom is that you should hate your ex- as a way of breaking free and starting a new life. I saw that wasn't going to work. The framework I saw as the only one that would work, to build a new life for myself, was the one I had the mother say to the son. They were pretty much the words I used to my son about the breakup with his gf too. I told him to make sure they were still on good terms by the time he reaches my age.

0 min

Author to audience (long version, optional):

Recently my son left for his second year in college 1000 miles away.

I remember in the run-up before his high school graduation, wondering what life would be like living in an empty nest. I was the last of my friends to have children, so I would

have expected to hear something, but they hadn't said a word.

One or two of them joked

"Well it was a bit different. I had lots of time to do things. I painted the house, I played golf again."

Apparently your kid leaving home was an unremarkable event.

Not having been educated in the American system, and having no idea what an American high school graduation was like, the year before my son was to graduate, I went to the ceremony for the kids a year ahead of him. I knew many of them from the school's plays, musicals, and recitals. Many of them were my son's friends and he'd talk about them. I watched the kids being presented with prizes. I knew most of them. I was sorry that, in the upcoming year, when I went to school productions, I wouldn't be seeing their familiar faces, on the school's stage and hearing their familiar voices. The school's stage would look empty without them.

Sitting there that day in the auditorium, with rows of people that stretched to the horizon, I realized that a year later, when it came time for my son to graduate, that I would not be celebrating the resumption of my golfing.

After I'd written this piece, I recalled the movie "American Graffiti" and the anguish of the two male leads, making their decisions to leave home and go off to college.

Sure enough, a year later my son graduated from high school and then left for college in a far off town. I hadn't prepared for it. The previous year had been consumed with college applications and interminable waiting. In the middle of that year my partner left, taking our son with her. They still lived in the same town, but now I only saw my son at school events. I spent the year on the edge of my seat, chewing on my fingernails, waiting for college acceptances.

When finally he did leave town, it was awful. It felt like I'd broken up with a long term girlfriend or the end of a marriage. I wondered why no-one had warned me what it would be like. Was I the only one who felt this way?

I talked to a long time woman friend. She said it had taken a year to get over her daughter leaving home; it was worse than the breakup of her two marriages.

Then at the end of my son's first year in college, he returned for the summer. I thought I'd gone through it all the year before and I would be OK when he left in the fall, for his 2nd year in college. I wasn't. It wasn't as bad as the previous year, but it wasn't great either.

At lunch in one of Anoo's day workshops, I talked to a

woman, a recent empty nester.

"Why didn't anyone tell me about this?"

"your a man." she said sympathetically. "Men don't talk about this. Women know all about it and talk about it all the time."

Before one of Virginia Queen's acting classes, I talked to Abby about it, She said

"At high school graduations, the women are in each other's arms crying their eyes out, while the men are shaking hands, congratulating each other. It's much harder being a man."

So here we have "Graduation Day".

3mins

ACT ONE

FADE IN

1. EXT. GRADUATION CEREMONY --- INDOOR, DAY

0 min

Two chairs on stage, next to each other. as if the two chairs are part of a long row in an auditorium. Fred and Elsie enter from one side, moving as if there's a long row of chairs.

Elsie has a large box of tissues, which she keeps in her lap. She is grimly grasping a beaten up teddy bear. Elsie is free to cry, be in anguish, blow her nose and be inconsolable. Presumably someone could play up the humour of this. This is optional; I couldn't do it. I'm not playing this for laughs, so don't worry if you can't do it either.

Fred is restrained and together, just like all fathers are at their kid's graduations.

Fred and Elsie sit.

Opening short sentence suggested by Laura

FRED

Here we are Elsie, Peter's high school graduation.

ELSIE

(oblivious of Fred)

I remember Peter's birth like it was yesterday. I hurt so much from the delivery, but as I held him to my breast, I felt so much love. Now here we are today and he's leaving.

FRED

All I could think of was the hospital bills and paying for Peter's college.

ELSIE

The mothers have spent the week preparing and cooking for the graduation party tonight. None of us can believe it's all over.

CONTINUED

ELSIE (CONT'D)

(tugs at Fred's
sleeve)

Look Fred, there's John stepping forward to receive his diploma. He's been Peter's best friend since kindergarten. Not a week goes by that he isn't at our house, or Peter isn't at his place.

FRED

They both were accepted to the same college. They're going to be roommates next year. Isn't that great?

ELSIE

(looks tearfully at
Fred, speaks barely
audibly)

Yes ... I suppose so.

FRED

I know, I know. They both were accepted to summer programs and are catching the same flight out tomorrow morning. They'll only be coming home from the party in the morning, to pick up their bags.

ELSIE

(in her own world)

Peter's bags are at the front door, ready to go. I can't bear to look at them. I feel like I'm never going to see my baby again. My life will be so empty without him.

FRED

Well John's dad is a great guy. We're going to play golf tomorrow morning on the way back from the airport. Neither of us has played in 18yrs. I used to have an handicap of 11. I probably can't hit a ball right now.

ELSIE

(in her own world)

Peter's leaving all his geology posters, maps and diagrams and the Grand Canyon mural he spent a year on. At least we have that to remember him by.

FRED

Yes, he'll be a great geologist and John will be a great engineer.

ELSIE

(tugs at Fred's jacket)

Look Fred ... Angela. I was so sorry when they broke up and it was only a couple of months ago too. They've been together since middle school. I have all their photos at proms and parties. They always looked so happy together. I could imagine them married and with kids.

FRED

Angela's dad hasn't played golf in 18yrs either. He's going to be joining John's dad and me tomorrow morning.

ELSIE

Remember last year when Angela came to our house for Thanksgiving? Angela and I spent the whole morning together in the kitchen, preparing the food. It was just like having a daughter. You remember Fred, how I always wanted a daughter?

FRED

(Fred nods. He knows. It hasn't been a problem between them)
yes Elsie, I know.

ELSIE

That day I thought I was in heaven. Angela was so wonderful and all I could think of was her as my daughter-in-law.

FRED

You and Angela did a bang-up job. Peter and I spent the day playing video games, although he seemed to want to check out the kitchen a lot.

ELSIE

I thought when they were married, we could visit them for

(MORE)

ELSIE (CONT'D)

Thanksgiving or they could come here with their kids. Angela and I could do the same thing all over again. Wouldn't that have been wonderful Fred?

FRED

(sympathetically)

Yes Elsie.

ELSIE

... But it's all gone now ...

FRED

Peter will find other girlfriends Elsie.

ELSIE

I noticed a couple of days later, that the pictures of Angela were gone from his room. I took down their photos around the house. I see the empty spots now on the walls everywhere I look. Peter didn't say anything about it. I expect he was relieved not to see her face everywhere in the house anymore.

FRED

These things happen you know, Elsie. Peter told me they just lost interest in each other.

ELSIE

There was more to it than that Fred. Peter didn't eat lunch for 3 weeks. I went in one night after he went to bed to find him awake. I held his hand and listened to him cry. It was just like he was a baby again. I found his old teddy bear, this one right here, and gave it to him to hold.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

I talked to him.

Laura at the Cary Playwrights suggested that the light be only on Elsie for this next bit. Or else, have Elsie stand at the parapet and talk to Peter on the stage where he's receiving his diploma, or stand and talk as if she was talking to Peter in bed.

The Cary Playwrights said they were confused. Sometimes

I had Elsie saying "you" and sometimes "him" when talking to/about Peter. They didn't know who Elsie was talking to. If I'm having Elsie do a soliloquy from the balcony she should be talking to "you". Originally I had her talking to Fred, retelling the night where she talked to Peter. Here I have her doing a flashback.

Have Elsie spotlit (possibly standing) and have everyone else in the dark, as she talks to Peter. This is a stronger choice than having her re-telling the soliloquy to Fred 2nd hand.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

Peter, you saw something in Angela worth loving and of course you loved her. Now she doesn't want to be with you anymore, Peter. You didn't do anything wrong.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

There's nothing wrong with Angela, Peter. You did the right thing to love her.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

You're going to have to keep loving her, even if only in your heart. To do anything else would only hurt yourself.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

Your life is going to be different. You'll still have a life and you'll still be happy. There will be other people out there you can love. You'll find them in good time.

Elsie sits down. Normal lighting, with Fred now in focus.

FRED

Well his tennis sure went to hell.

ELSIE

He had other things on his mind then Fred.

FRED

Why didn't you tell me?

ELSIE

(not reproachfull)

I did. I told you he was upset about Angela.

FRED

He told me they'd lost interest in each other. Who was I to believe, you or him? ... He got knocked out of the school championships in the third round. He had a chance of being in the top four. I punched him in the shoulder "you can do it champ! maybe you just need more practice", but he kept saying that he'd lost interest and was off his game.

Elsie reaches over, takes Fred's hand and looks at him.

ELSIE

Fred, it wasn't just hard for Peter. It was hard for me too. I lost a daughter ... Now they're all leaving. Tomorrow morning, Peter and John; at the end of the summer, Angela. The place will be a ghost-town. 18 years of our lives are gone, just like that. All we have now is an empty house. ... I dread going back there Fred. I know when I open the door, the first thing I'm going to see is Peter's bags on the floor.

Fred brings over his free hand and is now holding Elsie's hand with both of his.

FRED

Don't worry Elsie, one day you'll have a new daughter-in-law cooking thanksgiving dinner with you in the kitchen.

ELSIE

Oh ... I hope so. ... Look Fred, Peter's getting the geology prize. What are the kids throwing at him?

FRED

They're paper mache rocks and rubber rocks. Peter was always bringing rocks to school and showing them to people. Now they're getting back at him. John told me they were going to do it. He asked me if I wanted to make one and he'd throw it for me. Watch John. He's about to throw mine; it's the blue one.

Fred and Elsie stand up

ELSIE

That's it. It's all over.
Tomorrow morning I say good-bye to
my baby. It's the end of my life.

2. INT. DINING ROOM --- MORNING

Laura finds the morning after scene anti-climatic.

Elsie seated looking at a computer monitor, hands on
keyboard/mouse. The teddy bear and tissues are on her lap
and she is still tearfull.

Fred enters, puts down golf bags. Fred puts his hand on her
shoulder/gives her a gentle squeeze.

FRED

(gently)

Hi Elsie, how are you doing?

ELSIE

Oh Fred, I haven't left this
chair since we got back from the
airport. I've been following
Peter's plane with Google. He got
to Dallas/Ft Worth on time and had
a 1hr layover. I called him to
make sure he was OK. ... he is OK

FRED

(not quite sure what
to say)

oh, good.

ELSIE

I talked to him for 3/4hr to make
sure he was OK. About half an hour
ago he landed on the west coast.
I called him in baggage claim. I
wanted to make sure he was OK. ...
he is OK.

FRED

(still not quite
sure what to say)

oh, good.

ELSIE

Now Google doesn't know where my
baby is anymore. Oh, I hope he
can find his way to his dorm. I
don't know how he's going to make
it without me.

ELSIE (CONT'D)

(trying gamely to
smile through her
tears)

How was your first golf game in
18yrs?

FRED

Well, life will be different
without the kids, that's for sure.
The golf was OK, I guess ... for
none of us playing for so long.
Actually our golf has gone to hell.
No-one suggested we do it again.

FRED (CONT'D)

(Fred gives a
knowing look, like
he's expecting Elsie
to recognise the
code words)

Maybe we've lost interest or maybe
we're off our game.

ELSIE

(Elsie gives Fred a
gentle punch in the
shoulder)

You can do it champ. Maybe you
just need more practice.

9 mins

FADE OUT

Comments from the (Durham) playwright's group Playground.

This was read at the Playground playwright's group (Fall 2014). I got so many different disparate comments, it was not possible to find any single direction in which to move any part of this piece.

Some people thought the mother's soliloquy was too long and they lost track of the details. Others (Guy) said that they didn't pay attention to the details, but got into the feel of it, so by the time that the father said "well his tennis sure went to hell" it was a big bang.

Some thought the mother's soliloquy was a summary of her marriage to this dumb and unemotional guy.

Another person (Danielle) said "you know, it (the soliloquy) might just do as it is."

Another person (Danielle? Deborah, Annie) thought the soliloquy could stand on its own. Guy said to look up

Shakespeare's soliloquies to see how long they are.

"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?" takes 1:20 to read <http://www.nosweatshakespeare.com/quotes/what-light-through-yonder-window-breaks/>

"Is this a dagger which I see before me" takes 1:40 to read <http://www.nosweatshakespeare.com/quotes/is-this-a-dagger-i-see-before-me/>

Elsie's soliloquy takes 1:20 about Angela and another 20secs about Ted. This puts it in the middle of Shakespeare's soliloquies. (Fall 2015, I've shortened the Angela soliloquy. I removed the Ted soliloquy; it was confusing to the Cary Playwrights Forum, who asked "who is Ted"?)

Some had a hard time following the soliloquy. It wasn't meant to be followed. It wasn't a set of logical propositions leading to a conclusion. The mother had an upset son. It was an avalanche of statements to reassure the son that he had done the right thing and that his life would eventually get going again even if he could not see that at the moment. The mother didn't know which statements would land and just shotgunned the kid with everything she had.

Some thought Fred was unnecessarily dumb/useless/unemotional and wanted to make him a real person. Richard (who isn't like this), protested that guys aren't like this. Well maybe not, but I was raised to be like this. The way I wrote it, I wanted the father just to be a blank nice guy, out of contact with his emotions like all nice guys are supposed to be. He wasn't actively bad; he paid the bills, never said a harsh word to his wife and kid, took an interest in his son's activities. His son won a prize in high school, had at least one good friend and a nice girlfriend and got off to a college everyone is happy with. The family interacted with other families. The father must have done something right. What else are guys supposed to do? In many worlds this father gets 100%.

Fred could be the father of the family in "Bridges of Madison County"; he helps the kids with their animals and takes them to the county faire. He has no idea why Meryl Streep is crying at the end of the movie after she sees Clint Eastwood hang her rosary on his rear view mirror. How could he? The father was out of town the whole week of the movie.

Only the first scene was read at the Playwright's group. The second scene is short, only 2 pages. I did say that in the 2nd scene, the father does get to see what life is like without the son. Abigail asked to read the rest of the play, and I saw her reading the last two pages. Presumably she wanted to see the ending. She didn't pass any comments on what she'd read.

Some people didn't understand the mother's over-the-top

position. They thought she was really over-the-top. No, Elsie is a normal mother. I had her saying what she was feeling, so the audience could see her inner life on graduation day. This was a counterpoint to the father not being in contact with his feelings. In real life she wouldn't have expressed her feelings in the presence of the husband. She would have done it with other women.

At the end of the ceremony, the mother said "this is the end of my life". Some of the Playground thought she was on the point of committing suicide. No, if you've ever been dumped by someone, till you get over it, it feels like there's no reason to live. For the mother, the son leaving feels like the breakup of a marriage.

With the mother being over-the-top, some thought that the son leaving next day for the summer program, was his way of getting out from under a smothering mother as early as possible. No, I had the kid leave, so that everything would be happening all at once for the mother. If the son was just graduating, but going to be living at home for the rest of his life there would be no trauma for the mother. I wrote the script with the son well adjusted and driven, who had leapt at the opportunity to get on with his career, particularly as he had organised his life to do everything with his friend John.

Some people couldn't follow all the names of friends. Others (again Guy) ignored the names and just followed the story.

Quite a few people had a problem with the parents talking during the graduation ceremony. Guy (hooray) said that we can all suspend belief for a piece like this (and accept that people talk in a graduation ceremony). Others rationalised that some graduation ceremonies are outdoors and take a while (360 kids say) and that people would talk amongst themselves. Eventually everyone agreed that it would be OK if the ceremony was outside. I can't imagine why this was important. I wrote it thinking of my son's indoor graduation location. I didn't write the location into the scene. The audience can put the location anywhere they like.

This was a feeling piece. It seems that some people try to think about feeling pieces.

I see that most people had different takes on the piece. Not being able to see any single way to move any of it, I've decided to leave it as it is. Everyone listening seemed to create their own play out of it. Who am I to change that?