

## THE FUTURE IS THEIRS

As a teenager, Meredith had given her parents a run for their money - no, she had frightened them - even moving out of the house for a month in the middle of her senior year of high school, and then failing to graduate with her class because she skipped her earth science regents exam. When she finally did graduate, after eight weeks of summer classes and attainment of the minimum passing exam grade of sixty-five, a score that Tom felt certain had been a gift from the instructor, the sunny but subdued fifteen minute ceremony was conducted in the school's tiny courtyard, rather than the downtown arena where the raucous, dignified June commencement was annually held before an overflow crowd; and the ninety second keynote address was delivered by the director of vocational education, who told the twenty or so graduates, with their ill-fitting caps and gowns, their fatuous expressions and assorted facial piercings, that the future was theirs. Meredith, wearing a tie-dyed head scarf underneath her cap and a ring in her nose, looked right at home among her classmates. Until two years ago she had been an honor student and the varsity volleyball team's star setter. Then she had "fallen in with the wrong crowd", which was true enough as far as it went, but seemed to her father a pitifully inadequate description of what had actually happened. What had happened? Tom had no idea. Meredith was back out of the house now - this was the first Tom had seen her in almost two weeks - and when, clutching her leather-bound diploma, she excitedly greeted her parents after the ceremony, she removed her

tasseled cap and, with a flourish, the tie-dyed scarf to reveal – “Ta da!” – that she had shaved her head.

“Do you like it?” she asked; and the apparent sincerity, the almost –almost - touching expectancy with which she posed the question made Tom wonder, and not for the first time, if she had lost her mind. After the fraught episodes and shameful scenes of the last two years, the idea that she had shaved her head bare for any reason other than the shock value – that regardless of her reasons for this disfigurement, she would expect her parents to like it – well, the kid just wasn’t thinking straight.

Tom just stared, and it fell to Jenny, as usual lately, to respond.

“Of course we don’t like it, Merry, you look like a cancer patient,” she said, but then stepped forward and ran a tentative hand over the girl’s gleaming pate, and, speaking woman to woman rather than mother to daughter, asked, “Did it hurt? Did you do it yourself? Are you going to keep it like this?” Then she motioned Tom over and asked a stranger to take their picture.

Other pictures were being taken – it looked to Tom like half the female graduates were already mothers, holding their diplomas in one arm and their toddlers in the other as they smiled for the cameras. As Tom and Jenny stood on either side of their daughter, with their arms around her waist, while the amiable Hispanic who had agreed to take their photo examined the buttons on top of the camera, the superintendent of schools, who had handed out the diplomas, walked by with the director of vocational education. Even now, Tom remained unreconciled to the circumstances of his daughter’s graduation (She had not been raised this way! What had gone wrong?); and in his shame had hoped against hope today to escape the notice of the superintendent, with whom he served on a Rotary Club committee.

The superintendent and Tom locked eyes for an instant, and as he continued past, the superintendent, an exceptionally discreet and politic man but clearly caught off guard by Tom's presence and obvious relation to this lovely but hairless graduate, gave him an ever-so-slightly-raised-eyebrow look of mildly puzzled and sympathetic recognition and reassessment. Tom managed to hold a smile through three snapshots, then dropped his pose and asked, "Time to go?"

"Daddy and I are so proud of you, sweetie," Jenny said, hugging her daughter, and Tom supposed that Jenny really was proud. "Unconditional love", this was called, though Tom considered it a term that would not stand up to the slightest scrutiny. Love, after all, was by its very nature conditional. I love you because of you being you, because of the condition of you being you, rather than someone else. Furthermore, the idea that I would continue to love you no matter what, that there was nothing you could do – join the Ku Klux Klan, say, or become a serial killer – to forfeit my love, was preposterous, an insult to my integrity and yours. Certainly, no one could claim that the effects of all this limitless love - of young people knowing they could count on their parents' affection no matter what – were entirely salutary. Half the kids in this ceremony today were probably the victims of their parents' unconditional love.

Tom looked at Jenny as, with tears in her eyes, she again ran her hand over Meredith's head, no longer tentatively but as tenderly as she had done when the girl was a baby. He had to admit that his wife's love for their daughter was at least less conditional than his own.

Tom had been aware throughout the ceremony of a gypsyish group of five or six young people, a few years older than Meredith perhaps, huddled at the courtyard's arboreal entrance arch. They were now watching Tom and his family and whispering to one another with

knowing smiles. These, Tom supposed, were the kids with whom his daughter lived, a supposition confirmed when she called them over to be introduced. The introductions were awkward on Tom's side only: Meredith's friends were all weirdly smiling and very polite; though Tom suspected, as he successively clasped their limp hands, that this politeness held a hint of mockery. The one of the group who made the strongest impression – the only one who seemed to understand the dynamics and significance of a handshake - was a very tall, slender, good looking boy of indeterminate race. Tom, thinking of conspiracies, immediately branded him the leader. He wore an enormous, unruly though not unbecoming Afro, and, in this eighty degree heat, an army fatigue jacket and waist-length woolen scarf.

“Ready for some lunch?” Tom asked, of Meredith and Jenny only, when the introductions were complete.

“Oh, geez, Dad, these guys are taking me to the Lost Dog,” Meredith said, regretfully, though she appeared not to recall – and neither parent attempted to remind her - that her mother had made this lunch date with her last week, over the phone. After Meredith had promised to stop by home later, and given both her parents a kiss, the gypsy band closed around her. During the half dozen visits Tom had made to the school these past months to meet with Meredith's counselor, it had struck him, as he walked by the cafeteria during lunch period or maneuvered the crowded halls as the students passed between classes, that smug, ill-mannered, badly groomed, clueless, aimless young people, certainly not fit to lead socially useful lives, were becoming more numerous and less marginal by the year. Considering Meredith's friends and her fellow graduates, Tom wondered whether such youngsters represented a simple generation gap, or a genuine national calamity. Might they someday achieve – had they already reached – a critical mass that would spell doom for the country?

As Tom watched his daughter and her friends walk down the street, he saw the tall boy – he had already forgotten his name – rub Meredith’s head possessively. “You never stop being a parent,” Tom’s mother had warned him last year, when he had gone to her for advice after Meredith failed to come home one night, “they’re yours for life. Don’t expect them to appreciate what they put you through – at least not until they’re parents themselves, and sometimes not even then.” Tom took his wife’s hand, and watched their daughter turn the corner, and walk off into whatever future might be hers, and his, and theirs.