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A Place Like Home

When I was fourteen, I moved into a brick mansion. The estate comprised over two hundred acres of unblemished rolling Connecticut hills. Wide maple trees, their leaves tinted orange, marked the boundaries of the property. Hundred-year-old ivy crawled up the brick towers. Over the fountained pond, a brick patio jutted out just far enough for a cloud of mist to float relief over any sunbathers soaking in the last rays of summer sun. By the main building, there was a circular driveway where the town cars of Connecticut elites wound their way to the heavy wooden double doors at the building's entrance. Inside, there was an archway to the right that opened into a theater filled with red velvet seats, while to the left, echoing voices bounced down a long hallway. The floors shone so brightly they reflected the bodies gliding across them. As they walked down the hallway, visitors passed an art gallery with glass doors, a red-carpeted library room where administrative meetings were held, and three dining rooms built of rich mahogany. Downstairs, secret basement pathways tunneled through the foundation. For four years I lived in this mansion. I ate there; I slept there; most importantly, I studied there. Every year, the Taft School is both school and home to over 570 students from all parts of the world. I was one of them.

I walked through the wooden double doors in September of 2008, picked up my nametag from a box of many others and pinned it to my shirt, labeling myself as a freshman. My parents and I walked down the hallway, past the art gallery and the library room and the dining halls, and

outside to the place where I was assigned to meet my “old girl” – the senior who would spend her day helping me move in and answering my questions. Briana showed us to Congdon Dormitory and my roommate-less room, a rare circumstance for a freshman. She helped me unpack but really just intruded on my final minutes with my parents. I knew we would soon have to go to the headmaster’s welcoming address, and then my parents would drive back to Massachusetts without me.

Briana finally left us, and we walked outside to the courtyard behind Congdon. Hundreds of plastic chairs had been arranged in the grass and faced a solitary wooden podium engraved with the Taft seal, a pentagonal symbol encircled by the words: “non ut sibi ministretur sed ut ministret,” not to be served but to serve. My parents and I sat, sweating and squinting, in the courtyard; all the “old boys and girls” stood under the shady trees at the edge of the grass. Headmaster Willy MacMullen walked up to the podium. He spoke of all the opportunities – academic, athletic, and social – Taft offered its students. He congratulated us all on our acceptances. He reminded parents how well we would be looked after by himself and the faculty. Finally he said, “Parents, the time has come to say your goodbyes.” I didn’t want to say goodbye. I didn’t want to live at the Taft School. I wanted to live on Thistle Lane with my parents and my dog and my best friend, Allie, three minutes down the road. But I didn’t say anything; I had chosen this for myself, so I couldn’t take it back now.

My parents walked me to the entrance of Congdon and I saw my mother’s chin begin to twitch. That triggered my tears. We said our goodbyes between sobs and intakes of breath. I turned and walked up the steps into my new home, while my parents turned and walked toward the car which would take them back to my old home. When I got to the top of the steps and through the door, I looked out the window and saw my father with his arm around my mother – a

sign of affection between them that I hadn't witnessed in a long time and I wished desperately was being given to me. I turned back around, alone, and climbed the stairs to my room.

The Taft School was founded in 1890 by Horace Dutton Taft – brother of the soon-to-be-president – in Pelham, New York, and was subsequently moved to its current location in Watertown, Connecticut. Originally an all boys' preparatory school, Taft welcomed girls in 1972, eighty-two years after its founding. Today, the student body of approximately 570 girls and boys is led by two elected head monitors – one boy and one girl – and a body of school monitors, together constituting Taft's student government. The student government plans major school events, like the annual Formal dance, meets with the headmaster and school deans to discuss possibilities for the school's development, and forms the Honor Court, which determines punishment when a student breaks a major school rule.

While school monitors are elected by student popular vote, students can also apply to be dormitory monitors. Dormitory monitors are juniors and seniors who live either within a lowerclassman dorm, or with their peers in an upperclassman dorm. A dormitory monitor within an upperclassman dorm must complete a "duty" once a week from 8 to 9:45. While on duty, the monitor knocks on every door to sign students into the dormitory for study hall, then she remains within her room with the door open, signaling she is available for help, both academic and otherwise. Dorm monitors also consult with the "dorm parents" – faculty members living within the dormitory – about how to make the dorm as safe, comfortable, and fun as possible. They plan dormitory events and offer support to other students. The girls of Taft are housed in a total of five dormitories placed throughout campus while the boys inhabit two much larger dormitories within "Main Building," the central building of campus.

While the majority of a Taft student's day is strictly scheduled – required extra curriculars immediately follow the class day and are not completed until dinner time – every weekday, lowerclassmen gather by the pond at 7 p.m. for “scene”: an hour of socializing and courting prior to the mandatory 8 to 10 o'clock study hall. Study hall is promptly followed by a 10:30 deadline for signing in to the dormitory for the night. At 9:45 upperclassmen study hall ends and their scene takes place in the “Jig” – the student union in the basement of Main Building. At 11 o'clock, juniors and seniors amble their way back to their respective dormitories for “sign-in” as well.

For many people in Westchester County, Connecticut, New York City, and certain wealthier areas of New Jersey, attending boarding school is part of a natural life progression. To many freshmen from those areas, Taft was analogous to their local public school in that they knew many of their fellow students prior to attending. Emma Katz was one such freshman. Over the years, Emma was in two of my classes, lived on the same floor as I did, and played intramural lacrosse with me. To this day she has never spoken to me. Emma's face was like a magnet – pulled into a smile when surrounded by her familiar clique, but repelling into a scowl when approached by anyone out of her inner circle. She was short, skinny, tan, and brunette, with deep brown, almost black, eyes and, like most Taft students, an amazingly stylish wardrobe. She was also completely opposed to meeting new people. The domination of students like Emma, from the wealthiest parts of a state containing some of the poorest and richest cities in America, made making friends difficult, and I spent most of my first semester begging my mother to let me leave.

My one source of solace was Alison Carlson. Mrs. Carlson was first my French teacher

but foremost my advisor. I met with her weekly and every week our conversation followed a pattern similar to this one from my third week at Taft:

“Hi! How are you?” she asked with a smile and a happy high-pitched intonation at the end.

“Ok,” I lied. “Better than last week.”

“I talked to your mom yesterday.”

Tears began to fall at the mention of my mother. Mrs. Carlson handed me a tissue and shut the door.

“I just wish I could go home,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“Your mother’s right though; you really can’t leave until you’ve given it at least a semester,” she reasoned. “It’s as hard for her to say no as it is for you to hear it. She misses you and I know she’d love to have you home. And it hurts her to hear you crying.” She paused. “I know this is going to sound difficult, but maybe you could cut back from calling her every day. It’s hard for her, and I think it’s keeping you from giving this place a chance.” She was trying to guilt me into relying on my mother less, and it was working.

I began following Mrs. Carlson’s advice and limited my calls home to three times a week. I relied on Mrs. Carlson when I normally would have relied on my mother. I grew to love her for responding to me when I was upset in much the same way my mother would have. I didn’t leave my room much, but somehow – I think in the third floor bathroom – I met three sophomores, Meredith, Krupa, and Katie, who became my friends. Katie, a West Virginia native, had a cascade of brown hair that fell to the small of her back and was missing a tooth. Every morning we “signed in” to mandatory breakfast. The four of us sat down at one of the round mahogany tables as Katie reached into her mouth, pulled out her retainer, fake tooth and all, and

plopped it down on a napkin. Then she took her bagel in her right hand, put a mound of cream cheese on the pointer finger of her left, and spread the cheese in a circle covering her bagel. She began ripping apart the bagel with her mouth, leaving distinct chunks where her missing tooth should have bitten down into the bread. When she was done, her retainer went back in place and Katie went off to class.

My three friends saved my relationship with Taft. We were all from different places and backgrounds, but our personalities meshed flawlessly. Krupa lived in Jamaica, New York, when she wasn't living across the hall from me in Congdon. Her roommate, Meredith, was from a wealthy town in Massachusetts, not far from my own hometown. Krupa and Meredith's room was the social epicenter of our clique. Krupa often paced around the room as she spoke Gujarati on the phone with her parents, only the occasional English "homework" recognizable by my American ears. Meredith sat on her bed either online shopping or watching the latest episode of a medical drama. And Katie lounged on Krupa's bed, toothless, showing me funny videos she had found on the Internet and snorting with laughter. What originally drew us together was our collective sense of humor. What held us together was our shared attitude. Two of us were on scholarships; the other two did not view their parents' tuition payments casually. We saw Taft as an opportunity to be earned and respected. We viewed our friendships with each other in the same way. By December, I was no longer nervous to leave my room because I knew I would have them by my side should I enter Emma Katz's magnetic field and elicit a scowl. I began to think that transferring to the public school in my hometown would just be more of a social struggle, and in March of 2009, I officially decided to stay at Taft.

I returned home to Massachusetts that summer with some hope for my future at Taft; still

I felt much more comfortable and therefore happier in Massachusetts, and on my first day home, I already dreaded going back to school in September. I felt that way for about three hours, until I sat down to dessert with my family.

“We need to tell you something,” my dad said quietly, his head down slightly but his eyes looking across the dinner table at my mother.

I looked at him, dropped my head to my shoulder and breathed, “No.” I knew what he was going to say before he said it: My parents were getting a divorce. My father hadn’t been living at home for over a month, they told me. I don’t remember what they said after that. I stopped listening. My oldest brother, Jon, was working, but I looked across the table at Nick, home from college, whose eyes were aimed at the floor.

“He already knows,” I thought. He wouldn’t even look at me. I walked away. My parents gave me a few minutes on my own before they knocked on the door to my room.

My mom said all the things you are supposed to say to your child when you get a divorce:

“This doesn’t mean we don’t love you.” She consoled me. “We love all three of you very much. Your father didn’t leave us; we both made this decision. We thought about it for a long time.” They had revealed the news to each of us as we finished our finals and returned home, she told me. Jon first, then Nick, and finally me.

Despite her efforts to soothe me, she couldn’t. “I just want Nick,” I said.

They let me go, and I escaped outside to my brother playing basketball in the driveway. Nick rarely showed affection, but I wasn’t going to suffer through this day without a hug from my brother. I ran up to him and forced his arms open. He stood there holding me in the driveway and then took his fist to rub the top of my head. Our parents were splitting up, and he was giving me a noogie.

When I returned to Taft for my sophomore year, I knew I needed to make more of an effort to foster a relationship with my school. My home was in turmoil. Taft was my home now; I needed to make it a safe place for me – a place of comfort. I was approached by a junior staff writer on the school paper and commissioned to write an article, I accepted. I auditioned for the school choir, Collegium Musicum, and was offered a spot as an alto, I joined. At the end of my sophomore year, I applied to become a dormitory monitor; I was offered the position. Finally, as my junior year approached, my English teacher suggested me as a peer editor in the school's writing center; despite my snowballing schedule, I agreed.

Academically, I was flourishing. Socially I faced another challenge: As Krupa, Meredith, Katie, and I realized they were eventually going to graduate and I was not, I needed to finally make the transition into my own grade. I latched on to a budding friendship I had made with one individual – Paige Roberts. She had a well-established group of friends, but Paige was welcoming and by the end of my junior year, Paige, Natalie, and Ashley were the members of my new clique. Oddly, I never talked with them about my parents' ongoing divorce. Maybe that was a good thing. My school insulated me from my family. I didn't have to witness my parents' marital struggles, and my friends never made me think about them either.

My new friends helped me integrate into Taft beyond my friendships with them: I gained the confidence that I was someone worth knowing and that it wasn't too late to build new relationships. Eventually, I moved enough out of the shadows to make friends on my own. I developed a firm friendship with Jackson Miller. To everyone at Taft, Jackson was the very sexy, very wealthy football star from New York City. To me, he was the very sexy, very wealthy boy that spent our forty-five minute psychology class trying to induce my laughter, which was followed promptly by a scolding from our teacher: Ms. Reilly. Jackson was six-feet tall and

brawny. His hair was thick and brown and flowed into waves when he let it grow long enough. His eyes were bright blue, and he used them to his advantage with all the female students – he didn't discriminate. He, like the majority of the student body, came from wealth and athletic ability. Though he was a friend to people like Emma Katz, he did not fit perfectly into her mold. Still, through Jackson, I learned firsthand about the stereotypical Taft student. Every month, he was invited to a party at the beautiful Greenwich, CT, home of one of our classmates – the host rotated between the most popular of those with the nicest houses – and always came back to school to relay the debauchery to me. Occasionally, police officers broke up Taft parties, relayed the event to the headmaster, and reprimanded the students and parents who were in attendance. The following month, the party moved to a new house, and a new set of parents played beer pong in their garage with an elite group of high school seniors.

While Jackson, accustomed to these practices from his years growing up in Manhattan, partook in these activities, he did not block the non-elite from entering his world. He knew and appreciated everybody. Through him, I met tens of other students and developed relationships with them. I discovered a body of students outside of the elite Taft population and many people within it that were happy to step out for a while. Soon I became almost comfortable walking around campus by myself, assured that I would see someone I knew.

One October night of my senior year, I closed my door at 9:45 having completed my weekly “duty” as a dormitory monitor, grabbed my phone and walked down three flights of the wide circular staircase in the middle of Centennial Dormitory. I opened the door to room 113 and saw Natalie and Ashley, both towering over me at five feet ten inches, rearranging their hair and putting on additional makeup. Paige was in her favorite blue sweatshirt and nestled in her bed, her silver cowboy hat atop her head – probably the result of an earlier study break during which

she performed for the others. We pulled Paige out of bed, walked toward the dormitory entrance, “signed out” in the notebook by the door and walked across campus to the Jig. The Jig contained several tables situated by windows overlooking the pond, a few pool and foosball tables, a Ping-Pong table, three leather couches, two large televisions and most importantly, a grill with food items available for purchase. Marty and Sandy, married couple and proprietors of the Jigger Shop, cooked grilled cheeses, fried mozzarella sticks, and composed my personal favorite – the bacon egg and cheese on a bagel – behind the grill counter. I ordered an Oreo smoothie, having snacked all throughout study hall, and the four of us made our way to one of the pool tables. Within a few minutes, the Jig was packed with seniors generating an underlying buzz to any conversation I had. Jackson’s roommate plugged his iPod into the speaker system while Jackson challenged Ashley and me to a pool match.

“Losers give me a massage,” he said.

We accepted, hoping both to win and to lose. We lost. Disappointingly, 11 o’clock approached. I was sad for “scene” to end, but I was happy that it made me sad. Jackson playfully lifted me onto his back as the herd of my classmates emigrated out of the Jig. He dropped me onto my feet at the end of the basement hallway and I walked with my friends along the outdoor brick path to Centennial Dorm.

By my final semester I was member of Collegium and preparing to tour with the group that summer, a peer editor in the writing center, a monitor, a member of the varsity volleyball team, and the news editor for the *Papyrus*. I had finally developed a mutualistic relationship with my school. It had always provided me with food, and a bed, but now it offered me friendships and the opportunities I was too inhibited to take advantage of at fourteen. In turn, I provided it

with a valuable scholar, athlete, and mentor. I gave a lot to that school, but it left an even greater impact on me.

In June of 2012 I returned, sweaty and squinting, to the sun that blazed down on the courtyard behind Congdon. My parents sat on the same beige plastic chairs they had four years previously. This time I wore a shiny blue robe, and while my mother's chin was quivering yet again, I was smiling. Mr. Wilson announced "Christina Ruggiero Morgan," and I walked across the stage, determined not to trip in the heels I had worn around the dorm so many times in preparation for this day. Headmaster MacMullen handed me the black leather bound case I knew held the piece of paper that meant so much to me – it meant that I had not only survived Taft, but I had succeeded at Taft in ways other than academics: I had learned to love the place that so frightened me when I first sat in that courtyard. I hadn't crumbled during the hardest transitions thus far in my life. My diploma represented my fortitude. After the ceremony, my brothers and father lifted all the boxes and suitcases out of my dorm room and into our car. Seniors had to be off campus by four; as quickly as Mr. MacMullen had kicked our parents off campus on move-in day, he was kicking us off today. My mother helped me remove the last hangings from my walls but really intruded on my final moments with my room. She took the final rolled up posters off of the floor and carried them downstairs. I stood in my empty room and cried. These were not the tears of dread for the future that I had cried four years ago, but tears of heartache. I had spent years cultivating a relationship with this campus. Now we were breaking apart. I wiped my eyes, grabbed the room key off my desk, looked at myself in the mirror, walked into the hallway, and closed the door.