

2013 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

First Place: *“A Profound Transformation,”* by Terri Vining

“If it’s not perfect, it’s not right,” proclaimed the freshly graduated sailor in front of me. The Navy looks good on him! The pristine dress-white uniform tailors to his athletic physique. He savors his coffee: the weight of the cup, the robust aroma, and the dark, bitter flavor. No caffeinated beverages allowed at Boot Camp. United States Naval Recruit Training Command is located at Great Lakes Naval Station, Illinois. Boot Camp is an eight-week program. August was the last time I laid eyes on him. A profound transformation has happened.

Twenty years old and about to embark on an amazing adventure, Mitch Vining is my oldest son. I have the extreme delight of spending eight hours with him. Tomorrow, he leaves for Pensacola, Florida undergoing six weeks of Advanced Training. Aboard the USS Ronald Regan, he’ll spend his first tour of duty. This aircraft carrier frequently visits Japan, Thailand, and Australia.

Mentally, I assess the metamorphosis of my child. The angles of his cheekbones and jawline are more pronounced. It matches angles of his steps. “In the Navy, we don’t cut corners.” While walking, all his turns are right angles. He remarks about being uncomfortable in his chair. We’re savoring a leisurely dinner at a casual dining restaurant. We intentionally stretch the experience out over appetizers, entrees and we’re now lingering over coffee and pie as if to somehow slow down time. For eight weeks, everywhere Mitch went his textbook was a constant companion. Any spare moment was devoted to study. If he sat, he sat on his textbook. Muscle memory nags at him; he should be sitting on his book. To him feeling a comfy cushion is foreign, and no longer comfortable. His posture is perfect: chest broad, shoulders back and head held high.

The waitress brings us another carafe of coffee. Listening to Mitch sharing stories has my full attention. “I can handle men yelling at me, all day long, in my face. Maybe, because I was primarily raised by a single mom, when my female RDC (Recruit Division Commander) would treat me like I was an idiot that really bothered me.”

“Everyone has a breakdown moment in Boot Camp. Mine came two weeks before Hell week. My RDC said that if our class averaged a 4.7, then we would all get a phone call. So come Hell week, I worked like crazy! A 5.0 is the highest grade we can get. I received that on all my inspections: weapons turnover, personal, zone, bunk, and locker. However, it broke my heart when I found out that despite no fault of my own, we made a 4.697 average. During inspections, we lose points for things not being perfect: like a button left unbuttoned, a loose string or a bad shave. I was furious that one guy being too lazy to double check his shirt buttons or shave was the reason I was deprived of a phone call. On top of it all, to prove a point, we were marched to the NEX (Navy Exchange) and forced to stand at attention and watch while all the other divisions got to call their parents. Afterwards, I went into the head (bathroom) and cried. For the record, let it be known, I ended Basic with a 5.0 average on all my inspections and a 4.6 on tests.”

It appears I am not the only one fascinated by Mitch’s stories. A slightly overweight man, gray hair at the temples wearing a tropical print button shirt slowly approaches our table. He reminds me of the type of guy like one of those great supporting actors in Hollywood films. He removes his hand from his pocket and extends it to Mitch, looking him dead center in the eyes “I want you to...” He begins and I can’t breathe.

“... thank you for your service. I have already paid for everyone’s dinner here.” Airman Apprentice Mitchell Vining firmly grips the gentleman’s hand, makes direct eye contact, shakes it once accompanied by a singular nod of his head and says, “Thank you, Sir.” My jaw drops, “No way,” escapes from my mouth as I suddenly regress to the vocabulary of a teenager. He points his finger at me, smiles and says, “Way! You folks enjoy the rest of your day.” Then, he walks away.

Breathe. Tears drop dampening the linen napkin on my lap as I am touched by this unselfish act of gratitude directed toward my child. Mitch breaks the solitude, “We were told at Boot Camp that when we are in public and in uniform things like this might happen. I still can’t believe it! They said, ‘when this happens know that they are not thanking you: It’s for all their relatives who served and for the Medal of Honor winners. It’s for all those that came before me. I must maintain my bearing and I must accept any kindness given on their behalf.’ I don’t deserve it, but it’s for them.”

Witnessing this profound transformation and observing that the Navy will indeed make a man out of him, I feel an unfamiliar emotion. Mitch displays: humility, honor, diligence, courage and commitment. Traits, I always knew he had, all it took was the right opportunity to develop them. In my heart lies an overriding belief that Mitch understands his purpose and is acutely aware of being an integral part of something greater than himself. I’ve heard some of my friend’s say, “I want to hold on to my kids as long as I can.” Not me. My motherly emotion strangely feels like magnetic repulsion. Fully satisfied that Mitch steams forward on the right course in life: I can hug him tight, say “I love you.” and let him go.

JUDGE’S COMMENTS

A mother has dinner with her newly transformed son, home from boot camp before returning to the Navy for advanced training. There is a palpable sense of the narrator’s pride in her son, and the details that show this transformation are where this essay really shines—“While walking, all his turns are right angles,” and “His posture is perfect: chest broad, shoulders back, and head held high.” This transformation is most apparent toward the end of the essay, in a near role-reversal between mother and son. In the final few sentences, the narrator reflects on the differences between herself and other mothers when, despite her joy at seeing her son, she “can hug him tight, say ‘I love you,’ and let him go.”

Elissa Cahn was the contest judge. She is an MFA Fiction student at Western Michigan University, where she teaches composition and serves as the nonfiction editor for Third Coast. Her work has appeared in: NANO Fiction, Midwestern Gothic, Harpur Palate, and Quarterly West. She is currently at work on a story collection.