A Personal Statement By Charles Wheelan

**1.**

Mother and daughter were hurrying to an appointment about the daughter’s future. The mother, who was fiftyish with short hair and a thin, almost gaunt face, steered their Lexus SUV into a strip mall occupied by a Safeway, a sushi restaurant, a dry cleaner, a health food store, an Italian bakery. “This can’t be right,” she said.

“This is 92 Coventry Road,” her daughter replied. “That’s the address. It says to go to the office entrance.”

“It’s a strip mall.”

“There must be offices,” the daughter insisted.

“In Safeway?” the mother asked.

“Let’s just ask someone,” the daughter said.

The mother opened her door and leaned out awkwardly, hoping to catch the attention of an older man pushing a shopping cart. “Excuse me,” she said, prompting the man to stop. “Are there offices here?”

“Offices for what?” he asked. “For the Safeway?”

“Commercial offices. Office space,” the woman offered. “We’re looking for the Build Your Future office.”

“Make Your Future,” her daughter said loudly.

“Sorry, I’ve never heard of it,” the man said. “Maybe there are offices down there at the end.” He pointed toward several doors, but no commercial signs hung above the walkway.

“Why would he know?” the daughter asked. “He’s just shopping here.”

“You told me to ask someone. If you’ve got a better idea, knock yourself out. I’m about to write a really big check here, and I would appreciate some appreciation.”

“You would appreciate some appreciation?”

The mother ignored the comment and climbed out of the car, slamming the door. She began walking briskly toward the far end of the mall, ankles wobbling slightly as her heels clicked on the asphalt. The shoes weren’t designed for speed walking through a parking lot. Her daughter remained in the car for several seconds before getting out to follow.

At the far end of the mall, just past a pet store, there was an entrance for a cluster of offices. The mother opened the door and peered inside, where there was nondescript beige carpet and a single elevator with a reasonably healthy green plant on one side and a directory of offices on the other: a cosmetic dentist, several law offices, an accounting firm, and Make Your Future. Second floor. The daughter pushed the elevator button, though it didn’t light up. She pushed it several more times to no better effect.

“We’re late,” the mother said, turning to a door marked Emergency Exit Only. She opened the door and began marching up the stairs, heels clicking on the poured cement.

“This is the emergency exit,” the daughter said, following behind.

“It’s the stairs,” the mother insisted as they reached the landing between floors. On the second floor, she pushed on the door to the offices but it was locked. A large sign in red capital letters said EXIT ONLY. NO RE-ENTRY.

“I told you,” the daughter said. Her mother, saying nothing, turned and walked briskly back down the stairs. As she emerged back in the lobby with her daughter right behind, the elevator, which had been summoned despite the unlit call button, was just closing. The daughter darted ahead, inserting her arm in the closing doors in time to send them clanking open again.

“Thank you,” the mother said. They rode to the second floor in silence. The Make Your Future office could easily have passed for a dental office (which it had been at one time). There was a small waiting area with commercial photos of famous places around the world: the Taj Mahal, Machu Picchu, Mount Everest. Despite the majesty of those places, the photos were of low quality, almost tawdry.

“This is it?” the daughter asked.

“You know as much as I do,” her mother replied tartly. She picked up a copy of *The Economist* from a small wooden table, where there were also several back issues of *The Atlantic* and current copies of the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* and the *Financial Times,* with its recognizable salmon color. She inspected the mailing address on *The Economist:* Dr. Jacob Blattman. “Yes, this is it,” she said.

Jacob Blattman had a full head of strikingly white hair, making his age hard to discern. His eyes were a bright aquamarine-blue and appeared even brighter set against the unruly white hair. Blattman was wearing a simple blue shirt, open at the collar, khaki pants, and running shoes. He had a wiry, athletic build, suggesting that he might wear the running shoes for running. He extended a hand. “Welcome.” The tone was polite but not friendly. “You must be Meredith Walker.” The mother nodded in acknowledgment, looking around the spartan office. “And Cedar,” Blattman continued, shaking hands with the daughter. “Like the tree?”

“Two *e’*s,” the girl said. “C-e-d-e-r. I know, it’s ridiculous. No one can spell it. No one knows if I’m a guy or a girl.”

“You suffer so,” her mother said.

“Just call me C,” the girl said, ignoring her mother’s dig.

“Okay, C. I’m Jacob Blattman, as you have probably figured out. It’s good to meet both of you. Is Mr. Walker going to be joining us?”

“He’ll try to come in the future,” Meredith answered.

“Don’t count on it,” C added. There was no bitterness in her voice, which made the comment more bitter.

“It’s best if the whole family is involved in this process,” Blattman said, “but we’ll do what we can do. At the end of the day, this is really about C.” Meredith Walker was still looking around the office, listening to Blattman but obviously focused elsewhere. “Is something wrong?” Blattman asked.

“This isn’t what I expected,” she replied.

“What were you expecting?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, weighing the answer. “But not this.”

“It’s a simple space, but it seems to work,” Blattman said.

“There’s a Safeway next door.”

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Mom,” C interjected. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“For what we’re going to be paying, I guess I thought it would be a little more, I don’t know, professional,” Meredith Walker explained.

Blattman nodded in acknowledgment. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We haven’t discussed fees—”

“I’ve heard—” Meredith interrupted.

“We haven’t discussed fees,” Blattman repeated, “and perhaps more important, I have not agreed to accept C as a client. There needs to be a good fit here. I have to be persuaded I can add value. C needs to be eager to engage in the process—not just willing, but eager.”

“I’m sorry. We should start at the beginning,” Meredith said with some contrition. “You turn away clients?”

“More often than not. Also, if I could just back up for one second, why does the office bother you?”

“It’s nothing. I shouldn’t have brought it up,” Meredith said.

“But you did bring it up,” C interjected. “And it was kind of rude.”

“Well, if I’m being honest,” Meredith began, “I thought it would be nicer.”

“More elegant,” Blattman offered. “Fancier. Paneled walls. Majestic views.”

“I don’t mean to be critical. I’m not sure we need to talk about this.”

“You brought it up,” C said.

Meredith explained, “If you go to a law office, it tends to look like they win cases.”

“And who do you think pays for that?” Blattman asked.

“We are spending way too much time on this,” Meredith said. “I’m sorry I said anything.”

“This is important,” Blattman said.

“Is it?” C asked. “Is it really?”

“Let me explain,” Blattman offered. “If I leased space with a view of the lake and half a million dollars in art and plush leather furniture, one of us is going to have to pay for it. Either you pay more, or I get less. I’m assuming you didn’t come here for the view, so why should either of us pay for a fancy office?”

“Okay, then,” Meredith said. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I’m glad you did,” Blattman said. “Because if this relationship is going to work, we need to question all the assumptions. The people around us are doing a lot of things that don’t always make sense when we shine a light on them. If everyone else is running briskly in one direction, we’re going to ask if that’s the direction we want to go before we join the crowd and start running.”

“That’s the Make Your Future process, is it?” Meredith asked skeptically. “That’s what a hundred and fifty thousand dollars gets us?”

“Did you pick this office on purpose?” C asked. Blattman turned and stared at her intently, the blue eyes locked on target. There was the hint of a smile, maybe just in the eyes. “It’s perfect,” she added.

“I do like the parking,” Blattman said.

“You can guarantee us that C gets in?” Meredith asked.

“It’s not that simple,” Blattman countered. “We have a process. My goal is to work with C to find the best fit.”

“Of course,” Meredith agreed. “We’ll do the process. We’ll watch people running, and then we’ll run in a different direction, but when all of that is done—”

“Mom, you’re being ridiculous.”

“You can guarantee that she gets into the college of her choice. That’s what I heard,” Meredith said.

Blattman leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He looked at C, who had the hint of a smile, and then back at her mother. “That is an oversimplified version of the typical arrangement,” Blattman said deliberately. “I will work with C, and I will work with you and Mr. Walker—”

“He will not be involved, trust me,” C interjected.

“I’m comfortable speaking on his behalf,” Meredith offered, prompting a loud guffaw from her daughter.

“In any event,” Blattman continued, “together we will agree on C’s top choice—”

“And you can guarantee that?” Meredith asked.

“No, please let me finish. If she is accepted, my fee is equal to two years of tuition at that school, excluding room and board. If she is not accepted, there is no charge.”

“And how often does that happen?” Meredith asked. “That someone doesn’t get in?”

“I don’t share aggregate numbers,” Blattman replied, holding Meredith’s gaze. “But I’m very good at what I do.”

“It’s a process,” Meredith said skeptically.

“Yes.”

“So how do we proceed,” Meredith asked.

“I’d like to have a conversation with C, if that’s okay,” Blattman said.

Meredith handed Blattman a bulging manila folder. “Here are her grades, test scores, a personal statement—not good, so we need help with that.”

Blattman waved away the folder. “We’re just going to talk first. There will be plenty of time for the rest.”

After her mother left the room, C said, “I’m sorry for all that.”

“What would you like to do next year?” Blattman asked.

“I don’t know. Bates, Bowdoin, Middlebury. My mom wants me to go to Brown. My dad thinks I’m a sophomore.”

“That wasn’t what I asked,” Blattman said. “What would you like to do next year? College is just one option.”

“I’m not joining the military,” C said.

“I don’t think you would thrive in the military,” Blattman parried with a straight face. There was a silence, and then C smiled with genuine warmth. Blattman continued, “My job is not to get you into college. It’s to figure out the best path forward.”

“Yeah, I get it,” C said. “Make Your Future. It’s kind of a cheesy name, don’t you think?”

“Probably too literal,” Blattman mused.

“What do you do with all the money?” C asked earnestly.

“We should focus on your future here.”

“Okay, we can do that in a minute. I do appreciate your time,” C said. “But really, I’m curious. You don’t seem like the big-spender type. If I run the math, like what do you do with it all?”

“That’s personal.”

“Of course it’s personal,” C answered. “That’s what makes it so interesting. I’m not saying you have to tell me. I’m just asking.” Blattman looked at C silently, weighing his response, at which point C added, “My dad owns a helicopter.”

“That’s relevant how?” Blattman asked, genuinely perplexed.

“Two reasons,” C explained. “First, I thought we were sharing. And second, that’s what I wrote my personal statement about.”

“You wrote your personal statement about your dad owning a helicopter?”

“It’s leased, technically. But yes, I wrote that it’s unconscionable. It’s a sign that capitalism has gone off the rails, that if we do not address income inequality our society will unravel—that kind of thing.”

“How did that go over with the family?” Blattman asked.

“Now I’m here.”

“Mmm,” Blattman acknowledged. And then after a pause, “I recycle it.”

“Recycle what?” C asked.

“The money. You asked what I do with my fees. I try to provide opportunities for students who would otherwise find college unaffordable. And other things in that spirit.”

C smiled with awareness. “You take money from people with helicopters . . .”

“What are you passionate about?” Blattman asked.

“I’m president of the French Club,” C replied.

“Seriously. Do you want to go to these places: Bates or Bowdoin or Brown?”

C shrugged. “Sure.”

“If you didn’t go to college, what would you do?” Blattman asked.

“Hah! I guess I would visit my parents in the hospital when they stroked out.”

“And after that.”

“For real? I’d probably try to write a graphic novel. Maybe travel.”

**2.**

C and her mother were late for the appointment, almost twenty minutes. They rushed into the waiting area of Make Your Future. The door to Blattman’s office was open and he waved them in. “Sorry we’re late,” Meredith said. “The traffic was terrible.”

“Not a problem,” Blattman replied. “My clients tend to be late, so I leave large buffers between appointments.”

“Why is that?” C asked. “That they tend to run late?”

“It’s just what I’ve observed over the years,” Blattman said.

“Can we get started? So we don’t waste the time we have,” Meredith insisted.

“It’s because they think their time is more important than other people’s time,” C offered. “Don’t you think?”

“Does every visit here have to be an emotional ordeal?” Meredith said.

“That’s a hard theory to test,” Blattman said, looking intently at C, who was wearing jeans and a gray University of Chicago sweatshirt. September had brought an unusual cold stretch. Her mother was in white jeans and a fitted down vest. Blattman was once again wearing khakis, a blue shirt, and running shoes.

“Please, can we get started?” Meredith implored.

“Of course,” Blattman said. “I’ve looked over all of C’s materials, and my honest assessment is that you don’t need me. I don’t—”

Meredith cut him off impatiently, “Oh, for God’s sake, we’re willing to pay the fee—”

“Hear me out,” Blattman said calmly. “What I’m hearing C say is that her first choice would be a gap year.”

“We’re not doing that,” Meredith answered.

“We?” C interjected.

“Okay, then,” Blattman continued. “C is a solid candidate for Bates, for Bowdoin, for Colby. I think she would be happy at any of them. You don’t need my help for that. Brown is a stretch, honestly. It’s a bit of a lottery.”

“She’s just another privileged white girl from the suburbs,” Meredith said.

“That’s not how I would put it,” Blattman said.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” C insisted. “I mean it’s literally true. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, just that I’m like nine thousand other rich kids.”

“That’s why we’re here!” Meredith exclaimed. “So you don’t look like every rich kid in Rye. That’s why we’re spending all this time and money.”

“You haven’t spent any money,” Blattman corrected her. “And I’m strongly advising you not to. C is a strong, self-possessed—”

“Do you always talk your clients out of hiring you?” Meredith asked quizzically.

“Most of them,” Blattman answered. “I try as hard as I can.”

Meredith shook her head in puzzlement. “Well, Brown is in the Ivy League. The others are not,” she declared. “Why wouldn’t we aim to put Ceder on the highest possible trajectory? Isn’t that what you do? I was told—”

“Okay,” Blattman said. “If we want to go that route, then we can make Brown our target. You know the fee structure. I can endeavor to make that happen.”

“What would you recommend?” C asked.

“I would recommend that you pick a handful of schools where you would be genuinely happy,” Blattman answered. “No safety school.”

“Oh, Jesus!” Meredith exclaimed.

Blattman continued. “If you get into any of them—a place you are really excited to go—then you defer for a year, take your gap year, do something that interests you, and start college the following year. If you don’t get into any of them, then you take your gap year and apply again next year. You’ll be more mature, you might have a different sense of where you want to go. You’ll look different on your applications . . . ”

“Brown,” Meredith said. “Is there paperwork?” Blattman opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a royal-blue folder. He opened the folder and removed a contract, which he laid in front of Meredith and C. “Do you have a pen?” Meredith asked.

“Hold on,” Blattman advised. “I need you to read this and initial each paragraph. There is a twenty-four-hour waiting period, and I will need your husband’s signature as well.”

“He’s in Singapore,” C said. “He’s living there.”

“He is not living there,” Meredith said. “He’s acquiring a company, and it makes sense for him to be there until the deal is done. Can’t we just sign this and move forward?”

“You’re making a huge commitment,” Blattman said.

“It’s two years of tuition,” Meredith said. “I understand that. We’re going to be paying tuition anyway. It’s not a life-changing sum, to be honest.”

“You are asking me to use every tool at my disposal to get C into Brown University,” Blattman offered, making eye contact with Meredith and then with C, who held his gaze.

“Every tool,” C repeated. “What exactly does that mean?”

“It’s in the contract,” Blattman answered. “If you want my honest opinion, I would urge you to walk out now.”

“What time is it in Singapore?” Meredith asked absently as she folded the contract and slid it into her large purse.

“You don’t think we should do this,” C said to Blattman.

“I was clear about that,” Blattman replied. “I think it would be a mistake.”

“How do we get this back to you?” Meredith asked.

“You can scan it, or mail it, or drop it off,” Blattman answered. “Please note that I take the confidentiality part of the agreement very seriously.”

“Of course,” Meredith agreed.

“I’d like to talk to C about her personal statement,” Blattman said.

“Good,” Meredith said. “It needs a lot of work.”

“Just the two of us,” Blattman continued.

Meredith stood to go. “I don’t know why this always needs to be some kind of secret,” she said. “The personal statement needs a lot of work.”

“You mentioned that,” Blattman said.

“It does suck,” Ceder said as her mother pulled the office door closed.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Blattman countered. “But I don’t think it fully conveys who you are as a person. You’re more interesting than this.”

“Dori Langlois was kidnapped by FARC guerillas,” Ceder said.

“Pardon?”

“Dori Langlois, a few years ahead of me. She went on a business trip with her dad to Bogotá and she got kidnapped—”

“I read about that.”

“She was a client of yours.”

“I don’t disclose my clients, and they’re not allowed to disclose the relationship, either,” Blattman said.

Ceder shrugged. “They held her for five days somewhere in the jungle. Do you know what she told me?”

“No, what?”

“She said it was fine. Kind of relaxing, actually. She had her own little hut. *She even said the food was good.*”

“I’m sure being kidnapped by FARC guerillas was very traumatic.”

“Now she’s at Princeton.”

“Is that right?”

“Am I going to be kidnapped by FARC guerillas?” Ceder asked.

“My understanding is that the FARC have signed a peace deal with the Colombian government,” Blattman said.

“Good to know,” Ceder said. “And Jamie Cohen—”

“Let’s focus on you.”

“He’s at Dartmouth.”

“That’s a beautiful place.”

“Apparently he’s still in a wheelchair.”

“Is that right?”

“Nobody knows how he fell off the roof. Or even why he was up there.” C stared intently at Blattman, who remained silent but did not look away. “Don’t you find that strange?” she asked.

“The key to a good personal statement,” Blattman said, “is giving a college the sense that they have found something special.”

“So not president of the French Club,” C said.

“No, not president of the French Club,” Blattman agreed.

“What if I’m not special?” C asked.

“That’s where I can help.”

**3.**

Meredith burst into Blattman’s inner office. She was wearing poorly fitting jeans and a gray sweatshirt with no logo. Her hair was disheveled. Blattman was sitting opposite the Lee family: Doctor Gregory Lee, his wife, Eunice, and their son Erik, who aspired to go to MIT. The Lees looked in surprise at Meredith, who was jabbing a finger at Blattman. “I know you did it!” she exclaimed.

Blattman stood and walked calmly toward Meredith. “Excuse me,” he said to the Lees. And then to Meredith: “Let’s talk for a moment outside.”

“I know it,” Meredith growled as Blattman guided her gently to the outer office, shutting the door behind him. *“I know it was you,”* she repeated, swinging ineffectively at Blattman.

“Please tell me what happened,” Blattman said. He placed his hands on Meredith’s arms, in part as a gesture of support but also to prevent another swing at him.

“Burned to the ground,” Meredith said. *“We lost everything.”*

“Your house?” Blattman asked. “Was anyone hurt?”

Meredith shook herself loose from Blattman’s hold. She waved an index finger in his face, right between his eyes. “Burned to the ground,” she repeated. “What wasn’t burned in the fire was ruined by the water.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Blattman repeated.

Meredith shook her head no. “We were in Michigan.” And then, after a second, “But you probably knew that.”

“I’m very sorry about this,” Blattman said. “You’re very upset, which is understandable. I need to speak with the Lee family right now—”

Meredith made a sweeping motion from her sweatshirt down to her jeans. “We lost everything. I had to go to Target to buy clothes. You’re looking at my new wardrobe.”

“Things will work out,” Blattman assured her. “We have an appointment on Tuesday. I know C will want to talk through all this. I’m glad no one was hurt.”

Meredith took a half step toward Blattman, who instinctively leaned away from her. She smiled angrily, her eyes narrowing. “She’d better fucking get into Brown.”

Five days later, Meredith and C arrived early for their appointment. Meredith had swapped out her Target jeans and sweatshirt for tailored blue slacks and a cashmere sweater. Blattman met them in the outer office. “I’m very sorry about the fire,” he said.

Meredith did not answer. She sat down on one of the chairs. “You two can do your thing,” she said.

Blattman waved C into his office. She sat down and handed him a manila folder. “What’s this?” he asked.

“My personal statement.”

“You were able to get it done . . . with all that was happening?”

C pointed at the envelope, urging Blattman to read the essay. He opened the envelope and took out several typed pages.

“Do you like it?” Blattman asked, but C merely nodded at the pages. Blattman began to read aloud: “We lost everything and we lost nothing.” He paused. “I like that. It’s Dickensian without feeling derivative.”

“Keep reading,” C instructed.

Blattman’s eyes moved down the page. “Wow, I like it. The part about the helicopter works now. Your dad really didn’t come home?”

“Next week,” C answered. “Something about a closing. He said there’s nothing he could do anyway. I suppose that’s true. The insurance is taking care of everything. We’re staying at a hotel.”

“Hmm,” Blattman acknowledged. He turned to the last page and continued reading. “This is wonderful,” he said. He read the last paragraph aloud:

The embers were still hot and glowing when we arrived. The bright lights the fire fighters set up illuminated the steam rising off the wreckage of our home. All kinds of things raced through my mind: deep respect for the men and women who came in the middle of the night to try to save our home but can’t afford to live in our town; a profound sense of gratitude that no one was hurt; amazement at the enormous footprint of our house, even after it had burned to the ground; and an overwhelming sense—a crystallization and deepening of something I had been feeling for a long time—that I want to live a life of purpose. I thought about Brown after the fire. *Really, I did.* (We stood on the front lawn for hours, so I thought about a lot of things.) I realized that Brown is a good place to set me on that path of purpose. But not “the perfect place” or “the right place”—because if I don’t get into Brown, I’ll go somewhere else. I’ll be fine. My family will be fine. Brown will be fine. For the first time in this ridiculous process, I felt completely at peace. Staring at the smoldering wreckage of one’s home has that effect.

Blattman chuckled as he read the final line: “Also, just in case you missed it, I was president of the French Club for two years.” He set the pages on his desk.

“My mom hates that line,” C said. “She went ballistic. *‘After everything we’ve done for you . . . Do you think this is some kind of joke?’* It was a full-blown tirade.”

“She’s been through a lot,” Blattman said. “But this is you. Don’t let anyone change anything.”

“I can still take a gap year,” C said. “If I get into Brown.”

“That’s right,” Blattman agreed. “I suspect your parents would agree to that.”

C nodded in agreement. “The dog was okay,” she said.

“Pardon?”

“Our dog, Maddie. She wasn’t hurt in the fire. She turned up in the neighbor’s backyard.”

“That’s good.”

“They have a fence. It’s not clear how she got inside the fence,” C said.

“Dogs can be very clever,” Blattman observed. “What did the firefighters say about that?”

“We didn’t mention it to them.”