

## Equations

Mum was upstairs, on the next level of the Mall, finishing up some business at the dental surgery. I had gone for my dental visit first, and then she went to have a check-up done afterwards – while we went about amusing ourselves. As the parking-lot was just adjacent to the video store, it seemed a good enough place from which to spot her walking past, and I was pretty sure I remembered where we'd parked; or at least my brother would remember if I didn't.

When we sat all there in the waiting room earlier, in the chill air-conditioned discomfort, the nervousness on my behalf was not due simply to the treatment that was awaiting me. I sat there focussed solely upon diverting my eyes from the placid gaze of the woman sitting at the reception desk opposite. With a tightening chest and face flushed, my hands reinforced their sweaty grip on the armchair fabric. That middle-aged woman was Mrs Wilson – mother of John Wilson, who was in my year at St. Patrick's. John was a tall, quiet, thick-headed sort of guy. On my last visit to that surgery, John had been sitting there in the room, casually waiting for his Mum to finish work, just as I came out from a session of having an unco-operative baby-tooth removed. Neither of us uttered a word, but we definitely noticed each other.

For some months now, I had been teased by other kids at school about whether I should "think about getting braces" on my teeth. Being an all-boys Catholic School, in the better suburbs of the city, there was a bit of money around. Lots of other *Year 8* boys were getting work done on their teeth. And of course, those already with the braces were the prime bullies on this matter. John Wilson wasn't a bully; but he was on the edges of that group who were.

"*We're here, Mum*", Dale yelled half-heartedly, as he and I gained on her from behind; the two of us skipping across the parking lot to avoid being hit by slow-moving traffic. Mum gave us a sharp glance but didn't say a word. She just walked quickly, head down, with a mild grimace on her face. When we got to her, she said she had some more things to get quickly at the grocers, so my brother and I accompanied her into the shopping centre.

With a bag full of vegetables, and none of the chocolates that Dale and I had tried in vain to persuade her to buy, we all returned to the car. Mum walked with a quick stride, her head with an unusual downwards focus, as if in a ponderous mood.

Dale's in the front seat this time – sucking on a *Minty* with his perfect teeth. I'm in the back, while Mum's starts the engine and turns down the AM-radio chatter. We're all sitting there clipping on our seatbelts in unison while the car is idling, and other vehicles slide calmly past. Mum is just staring straight ahead and then she begins:

"So apparently the cost of the orthodontic work you would need to get done, Peter, is quite astronomical..." she says, in a measured voice, ending with a little under-breath giggle.

I had heard that nervous laugh before.

"OK. I see", I muttered.

"I mean it is *really* expensive and not something we can properly afford right now; the way things are."

“Yeah that’s not good”, Dale added in sympathy.

“I suppose what I’m saying”, Mum continued, “is that it would mean having to decide between having a family holiday later this year – the Gold Coast, or where ever we were thinking about – or devoting that money to the cost of your braces, Pete”.

Things felt very serious all of a sudden. We sat there in the stale humidity of the car and nobody even wound down their windows. I was being put into a position of having to make a firm choice. On the outside it seemed the world had ground to a halt.

“Yeah, the holiday is more important”, I said calmly.

“I’m not really that fussed about my teeth – it doesn’t worry me *that much*”.

A thick pause lingered in the air, so I kept going...

“It’s not worth all that money”, I declared, breathlessly.

Turning around toward the backseat for the first time since we’d hopped in the car, Mum’s smile was warm and graceful:

“Oh that’s great, Pete, I’m really sorry about that but it’s a big choice right now.”

Then the handbrake was off and we were in reverse, backing out into the world. As we exited onto the street, Mum adds cheerfully, as almost a reminder to herself:

“Well I told them I would have to seriously give it some thought; so I will get back to Mrs Wilson and let her know...”.

My heart raced as I considered what John Wilson would surely find out about. On the way home we stopped and got take-away pizza for dinner, as we did most Fridays.

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At school the next Monday, I knew I’d be seeing John Wilson first period of the day, in Maths. He normally sat somewhere near the back of the room, but this time I was determined to not sit in front of his gaze. I tried to get in early to the classroom and luckily beat him to it.

Maths was not my strong point and Mrs Chong regularly insisted I sit near the front, to improve my attention to her explanations and her indecipherable work on the blackboard. She must’ve had a tiring weekend because there was no enthusiasm for shifting me up front.

I got through the whole forty minutes without John Wilson once turning around in my direction. The lesson went painfully slow, and Algebra made even less sense to me than it ever did.

Eventually, if anyone prodded me on it, I settled on declaring “*yeah, I’m getting braces next year*”.

[ENDS]