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PARENT AND CHILD

Powder
Mother
Eveline
My Oedipus Complex
Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Tobias Wolff was a child of a broken marriage. After his parents’ divorce, he traveled around the country with his mother, ending up in the Pacific Northwest, where his mother married an abusive man. Wolff chronicled his traumatic childhood in the groundbreaking memoir *This Boy’s Life* (1989), which was later made into a movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro. His second memoir, *Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994), described his tour of duty in Vietnam as a member of the Green Berets. Today, he is a professor at Stanford University.

Powder
A boy and his father bond in an unusual way.

Just before Christmas my father took me skiing at Mount Baker. He’d had to fight for the privilege of my company, because my mother was still angry with him for sneaking me into a nightclub during our last visit, to see Thelonious Monk. He wouldn’t give up. He promised, hand on heart, to take good care of me and have me home for dinner on Christmas Eve, and she relented. But as we were checking out of the lodge that morning it began to snow, and in this snow he observed some quality that made it necessary for us to get in one last run. We got in several last runs. He was indifferent to my fretting. Snow whirled around us in bitter, blinding squalls, hissing like sand, and still we skied. As the lift bore us to the peak yet again, my father looked at his watch and said, “Criminey. This’ll have to be a fast one.”

By now I couldn’t see the trail. There was no point in trying. I stuck to him like white on rice and did what he did and somehow made it to the bottom without sailing off a cliff. We returned our skis and my father put chains on the Austin-Healy while I swayed from foot to foot, clapping my mittens and wishing I were home. I could see everything. The green tablecloth, the plates with the holly pattern, the red candles waiting to be lit.

We passed a diner on our way out. “You want some soup?” my father asked. I shook my head. “Buck up,” he said. “I’ll get you there. Right, doctor?”

I was supposed to say, “Right, doctor,” but I didn’t say anything.

A state trooper waved us down outside the resort. A pair of sawhorses were blocking the road. The trooper came up to our car and bent down to my father’s window. His face was bleached by the cold. Snowflakes clung to his eyebrows and to the fur trim of his jacket and cap.

“Don’t tell me,” my father said.

The trooper told him. The road was closed. It might get cleared, it might not. Storm took everyone by surprise. So much, so fast. Hard to get people moving. Christmas Eve. What can you do?
My father said, “Look. We’re talking about four, five inches. I’ve taken this car through worse than that.”

The trooper straightened up, boots creaking. His face was out of sight but I could hear him. “The road is closed.”

My father sat with both hands on the wheel, rubbing the wood with his thumbs. He looked at the barricade for a long time. He seemed to be trying to master the idea of it. Then he thanked the trooper, and with a weird, old-maidy show of caution turned the car around. “Your mother will never forgive me for this,” he said.

“We should have left before,” I said. “Doctor.”

He didn’t speak to me again until we were both in a booth at the diner, waiting for our burgers. “She won’t forgive me,” he said. “Do you understand? Never.”

“I guess,” I said, but no guesswork was required; she wouldn’t forgive him.

“I can’t let that happen.” He bent toward me. “I’ll tell you what I want. I want us to be together again. Is that what you want?”

I wasn’t sure, but I said, “Yes, sir.”

He bumped my chin with his knuckles. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

When we finished eating he went to the pay phone in the back of the diner, then joined me in the booth again. I figured he’d called my mother, but he didn’t give a report. He sipped at his coffee and stared out the window at the empty road. “Come on!” When the trooper’s car went past, lights flashing, he got up and dropped some money on the check. “Okay. Vamanos.”

The wind had died. The snow was falling straight down, less of it now; lighter. We drove away from the resort, right up to the barricade. “Move it,” my father told me. When I looked at him he said, “What are you waiting for?” I got out and dragged one of the sawhorses aside, then pushed it back after he drove through. When I got inside the car he said, “Now you’re an accomplice. We go down together.” He put the car in gear and looked at me. “Joke, doctor.”

“Funny, doctor.”

Down the first long stretch I watched the road behind us, to see if the trooper was on our tail. The barricade vanished. Then there was nothing but snow: snow on the road, snow kicking up from the chains, snow on the trees, snow in the sky; and our trail in the snow. I faced around and had a shock. The lie of the road behind us had been

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12 *Vamanos.* Let’s go. (Spanish)  
13 *accomplice*  a partner in crime  
14 *go down*  experience defeat  
15 *on our tail*  following us
marked by our own tracks, but there were no tracks ahead of us. My father was breaking virgin snow between a line of tall trees. He was humming “Stars Fell on Alabama.” I felt snow brush along the floorboards under my feet. To keep my hands from shaking I clamped them between my knees.

My father grunted in a thoughtful way and said, “Don’t ever try this yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“That’s what you say now, but someday you’ll get your license and then you’ll think you can do anything. Only you won’t be able to do this. You need, I don’t know—a certain instinct.”

“Maybe I have it.”

“You don’t. You have your strong points, but not … you know. I only mention it because I don’t want you to get the idea this is something just anybody can do. I’m a great driver. That’s not a virtue, okay? It’s just a fact, and one you should be aware of. Of course you have to give the old heap some credit, too—there aren’t many cars I’d try this with. Listen!”

I listened. I heard the slap of the chains, the stiff, jerky rasp of the wipers, the purr of the engine. It really did purr. The car was almost new. My father couldn’t afford it, and kept promising to sell it, but here it was.

I said, “Where do you think that policeman went to?”

“Are you warm enough?” He reached over and cranked up the blower. Then he turned off the wipers. We didn’t need them. The clouds had brightened. A few sparse, feathery flakes drifted into our slipstream and were swept away. We left the trees and entered a broad field of snow that ran level for a while and then tilted sharply downward. Orange stakes had been planted at intervals in two parallel lines and my father ran a course between them, though they were far enough apart to leave considerable doubt in my mind as to where exactly the road lay. He was humming again, doing little scat riffs around the melody.

“Okay then. What are my strong points?”

“Don’t get me started,” he said. “It’d take all day.”

“Oh, right. Name one.”

“Easy. You always think ahead.”

True. I always thought ahead. I was a boy who kept his clothes on numbered hangers to ensure proper rotation. I bothered my teachers.

16 the old heap an old, rundown car (slang) 17 cranked up the blower turned up the heater
18 ran a course created a path 19 scat riffs improvised jazz tunes
for homework assignments far ahead of their due dates so I could make up schedules. I thought ahead, and that was why I knew that there would be other troopers waiting for us at the end of our ride, if we got there. What I did not know was that my father would wheedle and plead his way past them—he didn’t sing “O Tannenbaum” but just about—and get me home for dinner, buying a little more time before my mother decided to make the split final. I knew we’d get caught; I was resigned to it. And maybe for this reason I stopped moping and began to enjoy myself.

Why not? This was one for the books. Like being in a speedboat, only better. You can’t go downhill in a boat. And it was all ours. And it kept coming, the laden trees, the unbroken surface of snow, the sudden white vistas. Here and there I saw hints of the road, ditches, fences, stakes, but not so many that I could have found my way. But then I didn’t have to. My father in his forty-eighth year, rumpled, kind, bankrupt of honor, flushed with certainty. He was a great driver. All persuasion, no coercion. Such subtlety at the wheel, such tactful pedalwork. I actually trusted him. And the best was yet to come—switchbacks and hairpins impossible to describe. Except maybe to say this: If you haven’t driven fresh powder, you haven’t driven.

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20 wheedle  persuade through flattery  
21 “O Tannenbaum”  a song traditionally sung at Christmas  
22 moping  feeling and acting sad  
23 This was one for the books.  This was something to be remembered.  
24 rumpled  having a wrinkled and untidy appearance  
25 coercion  force  
26 subtlety  delicate skill  
27 switchbacks and hairpins  very sharp turns on a steep road

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**A Thinking about the Story**

Discuss the following questions with a partner.

What qualities do you usually associate with a father? How many of these qualities apply to the father in the story?
B  **Understanding the Plot**

Be prepared to answer the following questions with a partner or the whole class.

1. Why is the narrator’s mother reluctant to let him go skiing with his father?
2. What is the boy fretting about in line 10?
3. Why does the boy refuse the soup?
4. What will the consequences for the father be if he brings the boy home late?
5. Why does the father wait for the trooper’s car to go past?
6. Why does the father choose to call his son “an accomplice”?
   (lines 65–66)
7. What are the boy’s feelings as they leave the road and plow through the snow? List them in detail.
8. Why doesn’t the boy’s father answer his son’s question as to where the trooper has gone?
   (line 95)
9. What is the main difference between the son and his father?
10. Do the boy and his father encounter the troopers again? If so, what happens?
11. Does the boy ultimately enjoy the experience? Explain your answer.

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**PART 2  CRITICAL THINKING**

A  **Exploring Themes**

Reread “Powder.” As you read, think about how Wolff depicts the evolving father/son bond. Do you view the father differently the second time you read the story?

1. In what ways does the boy draw closer to his father during their adventure together?
2. What is the state of the parents’ relationship? Give as many details as possible to support your answer.
3. In what ways does the story invert the traditional father/son relationship?
4. How does the boy change in the course of the story?
B Analyzing the Author’s Style

REPETITION

Repetition can be an effective device for creating atmosphere or for indicating the significance of a theme. It can take the form of repetitive language or of parallel events that occur multiple times. In “Powder,” Wolff uses repetition in several ways.

Exercise 1
Examine carefully the various ways in which Wolff describes snow in lines 10–11, 70–76, 98–99, and 122–131. Show how each description echoes the narrator’s state of mind at that moment.

Exercise 2
The father and son address each other as “doctor” several times in the story. Explain the different ways that they use this nickname.

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is similar to repetition except that, instead of a repeated phrase or event, alliteration involves the repetition of consonant sounds to produce a certain effect. Wolff uses alliteration to evoke the experience of falling powder. For example, as the snowstorm diminishes, the narrator refers to a few ... feathery flakes (line 98). The repetition of the soft “f” sound reinforces the insubstantiality of the flakes, which are compared to light, fluffy feathers in distinct contrast to the earlier blizzard-like conditions.

Exercise 3
Answer the following questions.

1. What consonant sounds that refer to the snowstorm are repeated in line 11? How do they help evoke the storm?
2. What alliteration other than feathery flakes can you find in lines 98–99? What is the effect of this alliteration?
C Judging for Yourself

Express yourself as personally as you like in your answers to the following questions.

1. How old do you think the boy is? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Do you sympathize with the boy’s mother? Explain your answer fully.
3. What do you think of the father’s risk-taking? Is he reckless, or is he brave? Should he be punished?
4. Do you find the father an endearing character? Why or why not?
5. In your view, does the boy fundamentally benefit from this experience? If so, how? If not, why not?

D Making Connections

Answer the following questions in a small group.

1. In your culture, is there a typical role model for fathers? If yes, what is it? If no, why not?
2. Skiing is a popular winter sport in the United States. What are some popular winter sports in your country?
3. Are the police generally looked on as a positive or negative force in your country? Explain your answer.
4. How is divorce regarded in your country? Is it easy or difficult to get a divorce? Is there any shame attached to divorce?

E Debate

Decide whether you are for or against the following statement. Be prepared to argue your case in a class debate.

Divorce should be avoided for the sake of the children.

PART 3 GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

PARTICIPIAL PHRASES

Writers use participial phrases to add variety and economy to their sentences. Participial phrases begin with a present or past participle and, like adjectives, are used to give more information about the noun or pronoun they modify. Present participles end in -ing, while most past participles end in -ed, -d, or -t.
The participial phrase may be placed next to or away from the noun or pronoun it modifies. In the following examples, the participial phrase is in **bold** and the noun it modifies is **underlined**.

- The participial phrase can be placed next to the noun it modifies.
  
  … the red **candles waiting to be lit** (line 20)

  *The trooper bent his **face bleached by the cold** to the car window.*

- Sometimes the participial phrase is separated from the noun or pronoun it modifies. When this happens, a comma is needed.

  *My father sat with both hands on the wheel, **rubbing the wood with his thumbs**.* (lines 38–39)

- The participial phrase can sometimes be placed at the beginning of the sentence, before the noun it modifies. For example, the sentence above from the story could have been written:

  *Rubbing the wood with his thumbs, my father sat with both hands on the wheel.*

**Exercise 1**

In the following sentences from the story, underline each participial phrase and circle the noun or pronoun it modifies.

1. Snow whirled around us in bitter, blinding squalls, hissing like sand, and still we skied. (lines 10–11)

2. We returned our skis and my father put chains on the Austin-Healy while I swayed from foot to foot, clapping my mittens and wishing I were home. (lines 16–18)

3. I thought ahead, and that was why I knew there would be other troopers waiting for us at the end of our ride, if we got there. (lines 113–115)

4. What I did not know was that my father would wheedle and plead his way past them … and get me home for dinner, buying a little more time before my mother decided to make the split final. (lines 115–118)

5. My father in his forty-eighth year, rumpled, kind, bankrupt of honor, flushed with certainty. (lines 126–127)

**Exercise 2**

Combine the following sentence pairs by reducing one of the clauses in each pair to a participial phrase. You may use either a present or a past participle. The first one has been done for you.

1. A state trooper waved us down outside the resort. The trooper came up to our car and bent down to my father’s window. (lines 25–27)

   Waving us down outside the resort, the trooper came up to our car and bent down to my father’s window.
2. My father drove away. He promised hand on heart to take good care of me.
3. I stuck to him like white on rice. I somehow made it to the bottom without sailing off a cliff.
4. Snow covered the car. The car slid through the trees.
5. I knew we would get caught. I was resigned to the consequences.
6. I looked at my father at the end of the ride. I actually trusted him.

**Dangling Modifiers**

When a participial phrase is placed at the beginning of a sentence, it needs to modify the subject. If a participial phrase that is not meant to modify the subject is placed at the beginning of a sentence, the meaning will be unclear or distorted.

*Skiing down the mountain, snow fell in my eyes.*

As written, the participial phrase *skiing down the mountain* modifies *snow*, which doesn’t make any sense. Instead, the sentence could be written: *Skiing down the mountain, I had snow in my eyes.*

*Waiting for his plan to work, the trooper didn’t notice my father.*

In “Powder,” it is the father who comes up with a plan to distract the trooper, but the placement of the participial phrase makes it seem as if the policeman were planning something instead. The sentence could be rewritten: *The trooper didn’t notice my father waiting for his plan to work.* Now, the participial phrase correctly modifies the father. By making sure that your participial phrases are placed correctly, you will avoid confusion in your writing.

**Exercise 3**

Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate the dangling modifiers. Change only the independent clause, adding or altering words as necessary. You may need to change your independent clause from the active to the passive or vice versa.

1. Fretting horribly, the snow blinded the boy.
   ____________________________

2. Watching him take out his notebook, the trooper scared me.
   ____________________________

3. Sipping his coffee, the trooper’s car was observed by my father.
   ____________________________
4. Skiing through the trees, dense snow surrounded us.

5. After finishing the meal, the car engine was turned on.

**SENTENCE FRAGMENTS**

In formal writing, every sentence requires a main clause. If a sentence is made up of a phrase or if it contains only a dependent clause, it is called a sentence fragment. It should be noted that writers frequently ignore strict grammar rules and use sentence fragments in their creative work.

In “Powder,” Wolff writes:

So much, so fast. (line 32)

In this instance, the subject and verb are missing. A grammatically correct sentence would read: The snow fell hard and fast.

Hard to get people moving. (lines 32–33)

Once again, the subject and verb are missing. A grammatically correct sentence would read: It was hard to get people moving.

Because we were so late.

Here we have a dependent clause only; the main clause is missing. A grammatically correct sentence would read: I was getting increasingly anxious because we were so late.

**Exercise 4**

Rewrite the last paragraph of the story (lines 121–131). Take out all the sentence fragments and substitute complete sentences. Then compare what you have written with the original text and discuss the effect of the difference in style.

**PART 4 VOCABULARY BUILDING**

**ALLITERATIVE EXPRESSIONS**

We have seen how writers use alliteration—repetition of sounds within and across words—to create special effects. However, some words and phrases in English come “ready-made” with alliteration. For example, the father promises hand on heart (line 5) to bring his son home in time for dinner on Christmas Eve.
Exercise 1

Use a dictionary if necessary to find the meaning of these words and phrases and then write a definition on each line.

1. aid and abet
2. cold comfort
3. bag of bones
4. double-dealing
5. far-fetched
6. highhanded
7. life and limb
8. mind over matter
9. shipshape
10. wishy-washy

Exercise 2

Complete the sentences with an appropriate word or expression from the list in Exercise 1.

1. After her illness, she was nothing but a ________________.
2. “I wish you would learn to keep your room ________________,” sighed the mother to her teenage child.
3. There is a lot of ________________ in the criminal world.
4. The soldiers risked ________________ when confronting the overwhelming enemy numbers.
5. It is a serious offense to ________________ a criminal.
6. If managers are ________________, they will alienate their employees.
7. This is no time for ________________ actions, but rather for courage and determination.
8. The professor rejected the student’s ________________ excuse about an alien snatching his homework.
9. It was ________________ to the boy to hear he’d failed the exam by only one point.
10. Don’t allow yourself to give up now since it’s definitely a case of ________________.
Prepositions are a vital part of sentence construction. They show the relationship of a noun or pronoun to other parts of a sentence. Knowing the correct preposition to use is often difficult since there are few set rules. Sometimes prepositions are part of fixed expressions and sometimes they depend on the context. It is helpful to work on recognizing them in a reading and then to practice using them.

Exercise 3

Complete the paragraph with the correct prepositions. All the expressions appear in the story. Try to do the exercise without referring to the story. Compare your answers with a partner.

As the boy and his father left the restaurant, the snow was whirling ________________ them, but his father seemed indifferent ________________ the bad weather. While the boy swayed ________________ foot ________________ foot, his father, flushed ________________ determination, urged his son into the car. Hand ________________ heart he promised his son that they would arrive home in time for Christmas Eve dinner, since he’d had to fight ________________ the right to see him that day. After a while, the boy drifted ________________ a dreamy state, and remembered how he had stuck ________________ his dad as they skied in the blizzard. He hunched over with his hands clamped tightly ________________ his knees and stared ________________ the scenery. His father revved up the engine, and the car ran a course ________________ the trees. The boy sat up straight, smiled, and decided that this journey would be one ________________ the books.

PART 5 WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Write a two-page essay on a memorable trip you have taken with a member of your family. In your essay, depict the surroundings, describe the relationship with your relative, and say whether the experience changed you in any way. Try to use participial phrases in your description.

2. Close to 50 percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce. In an essay of two to three pages, examine the issue of divorce in your country. Give the divorce-rate statistics, analyze the major reasons couples split up, and say what the effect frequently is on the family.
In your conclusion, explain what measures might be taken to lower the divorce rate.

3. John Le Carré’s spy novel *A Perfect Spy* and Steven Spielberg’s movie *Catch Me If You Can* both feature charming, irresponsible, dishonest fathers whose behavior has a profound effect on their sons. Write an essay on a book you’ve read or movie or play that you’ve seen that deals with the effect of an unusual parent on his or her children. Say whether the ending left you feeling uplifted or depressed.