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Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Ryan. (2018). Welcome to the Real World: A Skeptical Examination of Working Class Life. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 276. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/276

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Welcome to the Real World:
A Skeptical Examination of Working Class Life

Ryan O'Connor

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 8, 2018

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The Handshake

Another person's hands are generally the first thing you are introduced to when you are born. As a crying, pudgy, messy little we emerge from our mother's womb and into the hands of a doctor, your first handshake. From then on, for those who are able-bodied, your hands accomplish many of the daily tasks you undertake. We carry small children in our loving hands, nurturing them until the day they barely want to even give us a hug anymore. Our hands are how we show our love to our significant other, utilizing them to bring that person closer to us, making them feel warmer on cold nights in bed together. Not all of us have that luxury and yet our bodies still crave the touch of another human being, without which many people spiral out of control, placing unhealthy amounts of value into someone's loving hands. Those loving hands can be the same ones that cause you harm if someone tries asserting their power over you, it's scary how much damage can be done in those moments all with those hands that once brought only love and joy.

We use our hands to earn a livelihood, working in unbearable conditions for long hours and doing irreparable damage to them. One of the first things you try to warm up when you are cold is your hands; cupping them over your mouth and blowing your warm breath into them and feeling a relieving warmth encase them for all but a second before the cold traps them once again.

The phrase "he built everything with his bare hands" gets thrown around quite a lot in my world, it's supposed to be a distinction but nowadays it feels like a term of endearment for us who aren't as skilled at building stuff. When I hear this phrase, I picture some dirty older man in a pair of dad jeans, greying hair and a Carhart shirt, smoking a *Lucky Strike* cigarette on his back porch which he probably built in his spare time. Those people are the ones who demand respect

where I come from, if you're not like them then you're nothing but a vagabond to everyone else. I've started paying close attention to the hands on those people and I notice how different they are from my own.

* * *

My dad has hands that can grip a basketball but his fingers aren't long, the former is a trait which I have been jealous of all my life. Their touch is pretty rough, the signs of a hard-working man which he has been all his life. Working in a printing press, doing deliveries, driving tractor trailers, and playing hockey during Boston's great hockey explosion after the Bruins won in 1970 and 1972.

On his right hand he can't bring his pinky finger up against his ring finger, they seem forever separate from each other. He broke his finger as a teenager in a fight with his older brother John, one of the few times my dad got the upper hand against his brother in one of the many fights throughout their youth. My dad wound up another punch aimed straight for his brother's face, John moved his head and my father missed his swing. His hand smacked right into the bottom step on the stairs, the knuckle bone was sticking out of the back of his hand.

One of the weirdest quirks I noticed about my dad's hands was that sometimes when he would be sitting next to me he'd make a fist but move his fingers up and down making a rubbing sound with them that sounded like sandpaper being rubbed to a surface. I have tried doing this and every time I do I can barely hear it unless I hold my hand above my chest. I could hear my dad do this same motion from across our dinner table or even in the kitchen.

His hands have been utilized mostly for hard labor as he has spent most of his adult life as a delivery driver for various companies. The last eighteen years he has worked for FedEx

Freight, driving an eighteen-wheeler all around Massachusetts making deliveries for many companies in the city, this is how he puts food on the table and raises his family.

* * *

My mom's hands are especially soft and warm as mittens. She takes good care of her nails and likes painting them in calming colors and moisturizes regularly. Her right hand is slightly rougher than her left, a gift from the work she does as a secretary for a visiting nurses Association. Her left hand however is smooth as silk. It is completely devoid of the regular markings that seem almost mandatory to be considered a part of the working-class livelihood. If there was a palm reading test that determined where my mom would fit into society they'd determine her to be in the upper echelon of the social hierarchy. yet still here she remains among us vagabonds stuck in between the world of the poor and the super-rich. My mom raised two children, ran a daycare, worked at a hospital and helped cook in our house while my dad was at work most of the day. Her hands may be reserved for the bourgeoisie but she certainly has put them to more use than any of them could ever imagine.

She's raised two children with these hands, worked tireless hours in front of a computer making sure the paperwork for the nurses she works with is all correct and she spent an entire summer slaving away at her studies to take her test in coding in order to find a better job. My mom's hands, if examined at by some expert, would be considered a pair of hands meant for love. To give hugs and help

* * *

My grandfather, Frank, had these gnarly working-man hands. Sliding your palm across his felt as though you were touching a piece of sheet metal. His nails were thick and discolored

from the limited care he took of them. He had more important things to care for like his family and his job and he did that with gusto.

Frank had the worst circulation in his hands. Touching them in the winter, even if he had spent all day in the heated house, felt like he had stuck his hands in the freezer and held on for five minutes. These cold hands were almost always searching for a cigarette or a cup of coffee from Dunkin Donuts, I always saw Frank with a cigarette in his hand up until he had to quit when he was put on oxygen. The walls of the in-law apartment in our house where he lived were turning yellow because of how much he smoked on that side of the house. That same yellow color was embedded in his fingernails.

* * *

“Have you ever shaken his hand? It’s like leather” was the first quote I ever heard spoken about my coworker Kenny’s rough hands. Kenny’s hands compliment his entire appearance: dirty, rough and with real grit and integrity. A true proletariat, Kenny has worked all his life in dirty jobs probably worse than the conditions we face at FedEx now. Kenny’s usually in by 3a.m. starting up his forklift and being engulfed in the dust and black residue from propane tanks that fills the air and is left all over the loading dock. The residue that never leaves our hands no matter how hard we scrub; sometimes when I rub my fingers together too much some black skin flakes will start to gather around my fingers and fall off. My friend at work said that if you blew up the building there would be a giant black cloud over Abington for weeks, personally I think our lone warehouse has the capabilities of poisoning the worlds water supply.

His clothes are all covered in stains and dirt not just from our line of work, but from his own projects at home and past jobs. I remember shaking his hand when I first met him, it really was as rough as a well-worn leather jacket or a seat in a Crown Victoria. His hands are usually

clasped around a cup of coffee from the locally known Marylou's at the top of the hill or holding a cigarette, I feel like that adds to his character. He kind of reminds me of Frank in this way, the two of them putting this much stress into their bodies and still coming out with a sense of humor.

I don't believe in the old British Literature idea of physiognomy, because as appalling as Kenny's countenance and sense of style may be, he's the nicest guy on the face of the Earth. You really can't stay mad at him if he makes a mistake because he will go out of his way to rectify it if you bring it to his attention.

* * *

One of my best friends, Isabelle, told me to describe her hands as "sweaty from anxiety" and I couldn't help but agree. Her hands are always cold and clammy from dealing with such bad anxiety attacks that it's the only feeling I know from her hands. Even just asking a waiter for a check would be enough to warrant such a clammy texture to her hands. The backsides of them are covered in small lighter parts of skin from when she kept picking at her scabs and on her right hand is a crudely drawn sun, something I could draw in an art class.

I never knew the capabilities her hands had until the night she tried killing herself. I had noticed the scars up and down her arms since we first met but the reality of that power her hands held was truly revealed to me on a cold February night. Stepping into her room, as she was about to leave for the hospital, I saw her arm dripping blood as she stood there about to leave for the hospital. She had cut really deep into her wrist, but thankfully her mom was taking her to get help. A half-hour before she had stopped answering me after saying "I don't want to talk to you anymore. Don't try stopping me", at which point I jumped out of bed and drove to her house. She gave me a hug before she left and I didn't know what encouragement I could give, I don't

know what you can say in a situation like that. I went to bed at 11p.m. and still had to get up for work at 3a.m. the next morning.

I haven't noticed any new scars on her arms in maybe a year now. She's utilizing her clammy, icicle-like hands for strenuous work now. She's saved up almost as much money as I have just from working at Dunkin Donuts, that's what comes from all those double shifts and long hours. I can't help but describe myself as anything but proud at her growth, sure her hands are still just as clammy as they were when I first met her, but they've accomplished a lot and I like to think their power to cause harm has subsided.

* * *

My hands do not reflect the hard work I have put into every day of my life. They're not these rough, scraped and battered mittens like the people I am surrounded by and have been raised by. My hands are still as soft and smooth as they were when I was working retail, not having to work my ass off on the dock and turn my fingers black from all the dirt the warehouse leaves behind. I know that biting cold feeling in my hands all too well working the loading dock on cold winter mornings, five months out of the year are spent with that feeling as I try to complete my work. This feeling makes every moment spent outside much longer than it should.

A coworker of mine when I worked in a clothing store used to always comment on the softness of my hands whenever we'd slap hands saying hello or goodbye to each other. My hands were like the coolest feeling to him, like a stress ball. I saw him a couple years later at a concert after we had moved on from working retail and sure enough, he commented on my soft hands. I was honestly proud that, even after two years of manual labor, they had retained their plush feeling.

I do see some wear and tear on the back of my hands sometimes. Some layers of skin on my palm starting to peel and crack, they're getting a bit rougher. I examine each crack and callus closely and with a sense of dread as I approach some similar fate as the people I have descended from.

I don't know what my hands will be worth if I had to turn them in at this very moment to some being that decides my place in the afterlife. If heaven is just as unfair as Earth has been then I feel like the people within working class livelihoods would be selected by the condition of their hands rather than our characters. I find this funny when I ponder such an injustice because if they measured our character, we would all be held in the highest regards amongst society.

Working Class Envy

“Life’s a shit sandwich, the more bread you got the less shit you have to eat.” My best friend’s dad told me that just after he had gotten out of five months in jail.

As much as I hate to agree with a statement related to appeasing capitalism and profiteering, I can’t help but find this statement all too true. Having said that I try to also avoid the cliché that money doesn’t buy happiness either because it kind of does in my eyes, some people just aren’t smart enough to handle that much money. I like to think that if I had the opportunity to have that much wealth I would be responsible and be set up with it for life. People like myself are just as corruptible as anyone else is but I feel like it has something to do with my upbringing and where I’ve been in my life, and the appreciation I have for hard work. Living just outside of the city of Boston Massachusetts, a city which has always been considered a working-class city, I’ve noticed there is an aesthetic based around that blue-collar ethic and it has dripped into the surrounding neighborhoods known as the “Greater Boston Area”, my neck of the woods.

I’ve worked my ass off for the last four years, studied hard at school for a degree I don’t fully understand the need for in multiple different majors and to this day I don’t think I’m really sure where I want to end up in the world. I’m not the only one of my kind, not by a large margin. Look at ninety percent of the students in classrooms nowadays and ask them what they are doing when they leave, how they get here and what time they went to sleep or woke up at and where. I guarantee quite a lot of those student’s answers will make the person asking the question flinch.

Almost all my friends and I work in hard labor. Jared works at a gas station, my friend Anthony and I both work the dock at FedEx Freight, Meola works in construction and Josh works in a group home which isn’t technically hard labor but I will elaborate on its toll on him.

Jared, Anthony and myself are the only ones in college and we still do our best in our studies because we like to learn when we are interested in the subject and because we want to better ourselves from our current situation. Not many members of the working class are able to elevate themselves from their stature, my parents struggled to give their family a good life and they still work themselves ragged. Somedays I wonder if that's the future I'm headed towards and it shocks me to my very core.

* * *

. One of the first things I noticed when I started working at FedEx was when I blew my nose and the tissue had turned black, I can thank the residue from the propane tanks for that. My fingers also turn black from all the work I've done throughout the morning. Filthy isn't enough to describe this place honestly. One of my now former co-workers, Angry Mike as we all referred to him, used to say "you gotta take a shower before you take a shower after working here" and he certainly was correct. Every day after work when I'm scrubbing the morning off of my body I look down to see how black I have made the water in my shower. I'm half impressed and half disappointed that this is what my job does to me, the affects it's probably having on my health and the fact that I don't want to get up tomorrow and have to do the same thing. I started working here because I needed money and making \$8.38 at my old retail job was not going to cut it anymore. Once I heard that FedEx would start me at \$16.00 an hour, I was already asking for the job.

When people find out I work for FedEx they immediately associate it with FedEx Express, which for some unnecessary reason actually gets on my nerves. I don't drive the little trucks similar to the UPS or Post Office trucks that you see whipping around every neighborhood delivering packages in piss-poor weather conditions. I work on the big eighteen-wheeler trucks,

unloading and loading them up in the warehouse so that they can go out and deliver large packages to companies or even residential pickups.

The warehouse I work in is massive compared to some of the other FedEx sites you may see but in reality, there's even bigger warehouses all across the country. I heard someone once say that FedEx was so big people thought the company was developing a secret underground society in the Midwest back in the 80s and 90s and honestly, I wouldn't be surprised to find out this was true. One of my supervisors, whom I was friendly with, came to our warehouse from an Ohio terminal and he showed me how big his old building was and compared ours to it. The Ohio terminal swallowed ours with just the yard where the trailers sit outside.

Every day I wake up at 3a.m., shovel some unhealthy breakfast down my face, make myself some tea, drive and clock in to work by 4a.m. I can honestly say there hasn't been a single day where I've looked forward to going to work in fact, the only thing I look forward to in my routine is the quiet drive on the empty streets at 3:30a.m. usually accompanied by some music of my choosing. When I clock in I am handed a folded piece of paper which is holding other piece of paper inside. Then I start up my forklift out on the dock and drive to the door I am supposed to unload. The folded piece is the manifest of the truck I will be working and tells me the door number it will be located at, the papers inside are the bills for the freight in the truck which need to be taken out. Those papers are how I identify where a piece of freight is going and I have to scan the barcode at the bottom to notify the system that this particular freight is on the truck I just moved it to.

I usually unload trucks which usually have twenty or more bills inside them. Those bills aren't always just individual piece of freight, some orders have four pallets of freight all going to the same company and I have to find all four of them, of course the guys who loaded the trucks

never put them close together and sometimes I'll find one piece when I first open the truck and the remaining pieces will be at the end of that same truck. It's quite an eye-rolling experience, especially if you find an order that is supposed to have eight pallets and you've only pulled out three and the truck is almost done.

Sometimes the freight is loaded properly, most times however I find myself questioning what went into the thought process of loading this mess of a truck. Seeing freight destroyed, having to clean it all up and make it look nice for a delivery is enough to make you want to quit your job on the first day but we all need the money. I'm amazed at the resilience of those whom I work with, as well as my own. It requires a lot of patience to work here and the turnover rate is so high at our jobs they don't allow new workers to have their own master key to unlock the trailers until after six months of employment. Otherwise it'd be a waste of nickel.

I used to be known as the angry guy on the dock. I was nineteen when first started working at FedEx, that made me the youngest in the building and I'd get a lot of grief from my supervisor Rob who was an ex-Marine and had his job down to a science. Anyone who messed up his system was a target for him and I was the newest one when I first came in there, any mistake I made Rob jumped on it and made it clear that I had screwed up bad. I learned to understand that if I did good I wouldn't hear about it, if I did bad I'd never hear the end of it. But I learned how to do the job just as good as everyone within a few months. I still messed up occasionally because handling freight that has come in as a giant mess isn't easy for anyone who has worked there and anytime I'd get something that fell over or got destroyed I'd throw a fit. I was really bad and I'm sure that's why a lot of my coworkers didn't really talk to me too much the first year or so I was there. I can't exactly root out why I was always so angry now that I look back on it.

My father always told me that it was all the angry music I listen to that forced me to become this angry headcase, but I don't think that was a factor. Honestly, I think the satanic music I listen to was actually a release of my anger rather than caging it and letting it harm me. I think the fact that I was waking up at 3a.m., getting to work by 4a.m. and battling the elements in the warehouse and my girlfriend dumped me and I still had not gotten over it when he told me I was an angry person. Just the combination of all of those events accented my rage and I blew off some steam. Since then I think I've really changed, the hissy-fits at work have subsided, I go about my business during the day and I still fill my ears with the satanic sounds of the music I enjoy. It all puts a smile on my face by the end of the day.

I'm quite calm now at work, mostly because I have kind of accepted my working-class fate and figure I will have to go through a lot of difficult situations before I find any inkling of peace in my life. I still do all of the same things I was doing back then when I was a pissy little dockworker; I still get up at 3a.m., work in the terrible conditions on the dock, go to school and do even more work for my classes than I ever had before. It seems the more meaningful work I have in my life, the less angry I am. Schoolwork has become the only work I really enjoy and now I have a boatload of it and when I finish it I'm not troubled when I'm presented with more of it.

Now as the hours pass on the dock I hear people yelling a lot more than I hear myself yelling. It's funny when it's from the guys who used to say how angry I was on the dock and laugh at my misfortune, I guess that's equally crude of me to do the same to them but at the same time I don't really care. I don't enjoy going to work but I do it because I have to right now, school's more important than my job but my job provides me with the opportunity to go to school.

* * *

Massachusetts is actually a popular tourist attraction across the world, attracting some 19 million tourists each year. I never understood what it was that brought so many people here until my father explained “there’s a shitload of landmarks in American history here. Of course, idiots will want to come see them”. My house is located right down the street from the Adams’ Houses, where American Presidents John and John Quincy Adams were born. I once told this to a friend from out of state and they immediately wanted to see them. When I brought my friend to the Adams’ Houses she almost didn’t see them because they’re so unexciting you would miss them if you weren’t paying attention.

Plymouth Rock is known as the place where America was founded, even though indigenous peoples had been living on this land for thousands of years before, but Plymouth Rock was where the white people came into the picture. Its landmark has become a local attraction for tourists which is generally why people visit Massachusetts so often, to view the landmarks related to our country’s “rich” history.

The marker is a granite canopy which has entrances on the side and inside is a railing stopping you from falling into the sand where the stone rests. On the stone the number “1620” is carved very neatly onto its surface. The Mayflower II is moored off the beach a few yards away but it is just floating there so you can see it when you drive in and appreciate the site of the historic rock.

When I was fourteen my family and I took a day for ourselves to go for a drive around the state, just to spend the day together. It was fun honestly, sitting in the car relaxing and getting to take in some pretty sights around my state despite it being a cold and rainy day. My dad chose at one point in our travels to visit Plymouth Rock, most likely because me or my older sister may

have said in passing that we had never been there before and now months later my parents made it a point to go out to Plymouth just to see the thing.

I recall getting to the parking lot and, most likely because of the rain, there wasn't as big of a crowd as you would expect to the landmark. I saw the canopy that draped over the site and walked in behind my dad. There it was sticking out of the ground, a landmark of our country's history. On the ground around it was multiple pieces of litter; a Dorito's bag tossed carelessly onto the sand next to it, a pack of Newport cigarettes and a crushed Bud Light beer can inside the landmark. Historic.

I tried to look appreciative of the historical significance of this so-called rock but all I could do was laugh as my dad comically stated "I swear that thing gets smaller every time I see it" while standing right next to me. I had to step out and let out my burst of laughter. That really was the significance of Plymouth Rock summed up right there, just a pebble in the dirt with a number on it. Considering how many indigenous lives were lost in the centuries since those pilgrims came here and all the other atrocities committed by our leaders I figure I can get a good cackle at American history's expense.

My mother took a candid photo of my father, my sister Jordan and me standing next to each other laughing possibly because my dad had taken it upon himself to make one more snappy remark at the sight of the place. My sister is in the middle laughing, I'm looking at my father also about to burst into laughter and my dad is busy looking like a proud, yet smug, man. It's one of my favorite family photos to this day. The photo doesn't take me back to the day, doesn't give me a happy feeling but I feel like it just describes my family best. If we were going to send a picture to sum up who we are as a family, that would be the one I would have sent in.

I once saw the Hope Diamond when it was on display in a museum in Washington D.C. I only saw it as “a big dumb rock”. My outburst in the middle of the display room was heard throughout the tour of the Museum and a bunch of people laughed, it even elicited a laugh out of the stern security guard by the door. I was in 6th grade and according to my mom I didn’t know any better, I couldn’t appreciate the value of such a precious gem. Eleven years later, I still think that diamond is nothing but a dumb rock.

My thesis on the Hope Diamond itself is that it is just an object with no actual value. It has been built up by people who think it looks elegant and now diamonds are things worth killing for. really just standing for working class people like myself to just look at and fawn over and blindly accept my fate as some worthless Serf who will never amount to something of such prestige or wealth. It sits in the museum, in the glass casing, necklace draped seemingly carelessly on the ridge that has been made for the box, and it’s still attached to the necklace, it was in the movie Titanic. Still all it does is show off what people of grandeur have and we don’t have, I get the feeling that most days the sick bastard who owns that diamond is watching the security video at his home in a comfy chair as people stare at the diamond and is really getting a kick out of it. Seeing people fawn over his riches.

* * *

The town I currently live in, Braintree Massachusetts, is, for lack of a better word, a weird town. Some call it a city because we elected a mayor in 2009 or so but it really is just a new kind of governing body. Don’t ask me to explain how government works, I’m not a political science major. The town is located a mere fifteen miles from the city of Boston and its schools are ranked as some of the highest in New England, maybe even the country. Yet everyone I knew or resented in high-school had their heads up their asses. Since I graduated I’ve known

three people who have died from heroin overdoses, a number of them have gotten arrested for petty crimes and one kid I know for sure was arrested for murder this past winter.

A recurring joke I tell people when they ask me where I live is: “It may be called Braintree, but those leaves are dead and rotting by now.” Pretty funny right? It comes from the people I knew, hung around with, or was bullied by in high school; these people weren’t exactly conversation carriers. At least not the conversations you would want to have, they only cared about getting drunk off of *Bud Light* on the weekends, their cars, flashy clothes and sneakers, which girl they were going to use for the night all of that. Apparently, they fried their brains smoking ganja each day and fighting each other over senseless mishaps like someone owing them twenty-dollars or something. I suppose you have to prioritize things. I always think about what they really are like to have a serious conversation with them, one that didn’t involve senseless drama. Having a conversation about what they care about, what they are truly passionate about and hear that shift in their voice when they start getting into talking about their little slice of life that they feel so strongly about. I think I’d look at them differently and they’d even look at me differently. It’s weird how our worlds crossed and I couldn’t connect with them in such a way.

My friend Jared and I live on the complete opposite ends of Braintree. He lives in East Braintree and I live in basically North Braintree, or as I usually tell people “I live near the mall” to make it easier for them to know where I am. That mall is basically a landmark in my town and I’ve avoided going there since I was fifteen and all the patrons became obnoxious to me. Every once in a while, you’ll hear about a shootout or a fight happening there and it just makes me glad I avoid it like the plague. Jared’s side of town is even more eccentric, his neighbors are generally people who have been forced out of the city because of the ever-increasing cost of living in

Boston, particularly in South Boston, Cambridge and Dorchester. East Braintree, since the rise in the housing market, has seen an increase in former residents of those boroughs. Jared was born and raised in South Boston but moved to Braintree when he was about ten years old. The archetype of these residents has become solidified in movies like *The Departed*, *Gone Baby Gone* and *The Town*: working class Irishmen and women, thick accents, all formerly employed by Whitey Bulger and whatnot. That archetype is disappearing from the cities and moving into the suburbs of where Jared and I live. It's all yuppies in those neighborhoods now and the working-class Bostonian is quickly disappearing each year. So, if you see a movie with such characters, just know that they exist but they don't live in Boston anymore.

Jared and I prefer taking walks as opposed to driving around his neighborhood. It's a ritual we do because there's plenty of calming sights in East Braintree. Watson park is a classic drinking spot for all the Braintree High School kids and we were no strangers to this. It's where the baseball fields in East Braintree are, I used to play on them in my mediocre days of Babe Ruth baseball league. The Fore River runs off right by Watson and behind the stone wall at the edge of the park is a about ten feet of grass and rocks which drops off into the river. There were always police cruisers crawling patrolling by the park at night, eventually we started being able to spot them by the headlights. My friends and I also knew if you stood still when a cruiser passed by they wouldn't see you, or we'd just sit down in the bushes and hope the harbor master didn't come rolling by on the boat.

The water in that river is toxic, we knew better than to set foot in the river because we always joked that you'd come out of it with a third testicle or other appendages. Our friend John Fraser jumped in the water on a bet one time and I congratulate him on integrity alone. The beach, which you can reach by walking down a short path in the woods, is usually desolate in the

summer time. People in that neighborhood know better than to let their kids swim in the Fore River, God only knows what toxins have come up in that thing even after the shipyard in Quincy shutdown decades ago.

There used to be a landmark in the Fore River shipyard which you could clearly see from any hill in Braintree with a clear line of sight. We used to have the second tallest shipbuilding crane in the world there, “the Goliath crane” utilized by General Dynamics since the 1970s. I used to daydream out of the window of my English class and I’d always see the crane while staring off into space. Sometimes I’d wonder what it’d be like working on that monstrosity, or just to be able to watch it at work. The poor thing was rusting so bad you could see the discoloration from my school which was miles away from it. Eventually some company in Romania thought they should put it to use rather than watch it rot in the shipyard and now it’s all the way across the pond in Romania. I heard a similar company to General Dynamics put it to some use which to me seems like a more fitting setting for the old relic, the sizeable beast is still chugging along doing the best it can. I don’t know what the end may be for that crane, I just hope no injuries are incurred when that thing finally draws its last breath.

Down the street from Jared lives a group of addicts who live in what we call the “PCP house”. Why do we call it the PCP house? Well it is because the guys who live there have all been involved in instances where they were arrested under the influence of the substance. It’s brought about some hilarious stories for me and Jared to tell in the backyard and reminisce about. A particular one that stood out for me was a day where one of the men was being pursued by two cop cars riding a motor scooter. Jared told me his only interaction with this scene was when he was having a smoke in his backyard and he suddenly heard a buzzing noise go up his street and turn off onto Quincy Ave, the main road which stretches all the way into Quincy

Center a few miles away from us. After hearing the buzzing of the scooter Jared saw flashing blue lights speeding up his street and a moment later could see another cruiser go down the street behind his house. Thinking nothing of it he continued on with his day. Next week Jared was reading the paper at his seldom used dinner table and read that the man up the street from him had taken those cruisers on a fifteen-mile chase from his neighborhood into Dorchester before he disappeared losing the police. He and I couldn't believe that guy got away from the police on a scooter and how embarrassing it must have been for those cops. As Jared was working at the gas station on Quincy Avenue up the street from his house, he saw the "PCP guy" riding up the sidewalk on a bicycle this time. Across the street in the parking lot of the convenience store was a police cruiser who started his car up and drove at the man on the bike. The cruiser struck the PCP guy at a speed that would injure him, not kill him, the impact sent the man off the bike onto the windshield and he rolled onto the concrete. The officer quickly scooped him up and hauled him into the back of the cruiser and drove away, case closed. I can't believe how much stuff I miss sometimes when I'm not in East Braintree.

Another resident of the PCP house was also involved in a run in with the police in East Braintree back in the summer of 2016. From what the news reported, the man walked into the Vietnamese Market right up the street from Jared's house, grabbed somebody's child from right behind them and tried running out the back door with the kid over his shoulder. The father chased after the man into the back room and a quick confrontation ensued in the back. The father came at the man, grabbed his head and put his head right up against his and stared him down, yelling obscenities at the whacked out, would-be criminal. The PCP man handed the child right back to the father. The police showed up at the store half an hour later and found the man out behind the building clenching a tree so hard the police had to pry him off of it with three men.

This is the kind of environment we live around. The main problem we have always worried about was becoming products of our environments. I admit I have it a little easier than Jared does; my family is held together, we're not rich but we live in a decent neighborhood, we eat together as a family and avoid arguments unlike his, and we say "I love you" a lot. All these happenings in my family seem to either confuse or just humor Jared. I realize I have things that he doesn't have and I don't intend to waste that, nor will I ever compare his struggle to my own but we talk constantly as though the world exists as a slight against people like us. We're those people everybody scoffed at in high school, calling us bums and burnouts even though they were nice to us when they needed something. Real phonies as Holden Caulfield would say. I've seen a few of my tormenters since I left high school and they're still here just like us, hanging around the same bars and trying to impress everyone. I kind of feel bad for them, at least I don't have to impress anyone in my life.

* * *

The work I do leaves its marks on my body, inside and out. My eyes have rings around them as dark as the water in my bathtub when I shower after I get off a shift usually at 10am., I punched in at 4a.m. I've had my share of injuries at work and they always make them out to be more difficult than they should be. From working at FedEx I've gotten a concussion from slamming my head off a steel beam, cracked a rib, had foot run over, and have almost had my fingers frostbitten from the cold on the dock. It seems like everyone I work with gets hurt, is out for a few weeks or is on light-duty and then after a while they're back to working full-duty.

Me on the other hand I get wrapped up in the mess known as workman's compensation, the clinic we go to is vague as hell about all their diagnoses and it feels like they just want me out of there. I've had my fair share of injuries, the biggest mark on my body came from a recent

injury where I sliced my leg open on a piece of steel on a pallet when I was walking by it inside the trailer and my leg got nicked by it. I felt the piece of steel catch me and it felt like a really bad scrape on my leg.

“Ow, shit!” I yelled to myself. When I looked down, my leg on the front left side of my calf was open and it started bleeding. “Oh shit!” I repeated to myself as I started hopping out of the trailer and calling for help. One of the truck drivers named Shawn was the first to notice me as I came hopping out of the truck.

“What happened man?” He asked right before he looked down at my leg. “Holy shit!” he yelled as his eyes fell on my now dripping leg wound. A moment later I was surrounded by my father, a fellow dockworker who took off his tank-top and made a tourniquet with it above my wound and I hopped into the breakroom holding myself up by my dad’s and Shawn’s shoulders. My father wrapped my leg up with a bandage and one of the over the road drivers, the guys who drive from New Jersey and other states and come back to our terminal, offered to drive me to the hospital which was half a mile up the road. He flew down the street and got me there in a few minutes. I needed a total of thirteen stitches.

That is the worst scar I have on my body, besides my tattoo but in terms of unwanted scars it is the ugliest one. I look at it with growing disdain, the summer it happened I didn’t really care about it when I wore shorts but now that I haven’t displayed it as much I almost forgot how ugly it made me look. I know now that it will always remind me of work and just how hard the job has been on my body. To anyone else it’s a scar that warrants a story but to me it’s a brand of my time served in manual labor as though I were cattle.

I see my body as emblematic of this land now. My dirty bathwater being the water in the Fore River, my scars being the gutted and abandoned Victorian houses I drive by all the time, the

marks on the streets which haven't been paved since the 1980s and the labor I do is disregarded like the laborers who built the city now can't afford to live in it. It's as though I were sculpted for this land

* * *

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is one of my favorite museums to visit. It's got beautiful exhibits of all corners of the world and I think the exhibits themselves are set up really well. I went there twice recently, once for class and most recently on Christmas Eve with my friends Jared and Anthony. We walked around the exhibit trying our best not to look too low-class and appreciate the craftsmanship of the art in every exhibit, except some of the modern ones which are really just straight lines on a wall. Pretentious stuff if you ask me.

The Museum is usually full of tourists, local families spending a day with each other, and college art students and professors who come from Emmanuel, Wentworth and Northeastern Universities right down the street. Of course, there are always outliers like myself who come there to indulge in the beautiful art as well but it's almost as though we are peasants and all the paintings are looking down upon us.

We left and decided to take a lengthy walk down the blistering cold streets of Boston that day. I usually don't mind the cold walks Jared usually drags me on, but this one felt much harsher than the ones we usually undertake. We originally agreed to go to Faneuil Hall to get something to eat but eventually it became us just walking for the sake of walking, like we usually do in Jared's neighborhood. As we got further away from the museum, the neighborhood we walked through seemed like a quaint little yuppie neighborhood complete with crowded streets and people who walk too slow for the inner city. I only wanted to get out of this gridlocked prison and go back to my neighborhood where people weren't in the way and I could walk at my

usual brisk pace. We Stopped at a 7-11 on Massachusetts Ave., across the street from Trinity Church where the signal for Paul Revere was set up the night of his and Israel Bissel's famous ride. We grabbed a couple bags of cashews and a soda to hold us over until we got back home. Jared stopped out front to light his cigarette, I stood in the middle between him and Anthony when suddenly, off to my left, I heard Anthony say "What's up man?" and I wondered who the hell he was talking to.

"Hey yo young man what's going on? I'm Damien." Said the scraggly older gentleman in tattered clothing. I only recall him starting to tell us his life story about a lot of different trials and tribulations in his life. He was definitely one of those homeless people you see asking for change on the streets but he had a better marketing scheme going on. According to Damien he had been married to a lovely woman and worked his fingers to the bone but soon his wife revealed that she was HIV positive and sure enough she had given him the disease as well. He got burned and he showed us the growths on his neck to confirm his story. Eventually the deal was laid out before us.

"Yo boys I'm gonna be honest, you see that fellow in the red hat across the street? Right at the church with the crowd around him?" He asked us pointing the man out.

"Yeah we see him" we replied.

"Imma be honest with you boys I'm headed over to him right now and going to buy crack from that dude." He finished. I was surprised by his honesty and his carefree attitude about the whole situation. He knew who he was as a person, he wasn't afraid to admit it and all he wanted from us was a buck or two to get him on his way. We felt we should oblige him simply because of his honesty and he made us laugh. We each gave him a couple bucks and he gave each of us a

hug and a handshake, showering praise onto us and saying “It really is a white Christmas after all. Thanks boys!” as he stepped onto the street to get to the opposite sidewalk.

At that point Anthony had started to walk away while Jared and I stood up against the wall. “Yo, you’re not gonna watch this? I paid for it I might as well watch it.” Jared called over to Anthony. When Damien got across the street to the dealer he turned around, raised up his hand, waved and thanked us again.

I couldn’t hold back the laughter from when Damien waved back at the three of us like we had just made his week. It was heartwarming honestly how Christmas had fit into all of this, it was the time of giving and our best way of giving was to help a man buy crack in the city across from Trinity Church. I noticed during all of this that the cold streets didn’t bother me as much anymore, my body had basically adjusted to it all which is odd considering I was freezing a mere five minutes beforehand.

Looking back on this now it makes me realize how much class is all based in perspective. There we were at the museum in our muck covered Timberland boots and leather jackets thinking we looked like bums amongst all of the artsy college students, scholars and tourists that littered the museum that Christmas. Then we go further into the city and find ourselves being considered the well-off members of society by those who were less fortunate. In all honesty, people like Damien treated us much kinder that day despite asking for our money; he was honest, he had shame in his heart but he still wanted to have a laugh with us and share a human moment. In my eyes, that makes this a bit sweeter rather than humorous; Damien may have wanted some money to buy from the man across the street but I think he also wanted to spend a few moments with some kind people, particularly because it was Christmas Eve.

* * *

When Fall arrives, around my neck of the woods it invokes an inner peace within me. I can wear pants and sweatshirts comfortably most days and the air starts to get a bit thicker, my friend Jared can detect it whenever he steps outside to light a cigarette most nights “it’s gonna be a cold one” he’ll usually say after a lengthy drag on his *Newport* unfiltered cigarette. I never noticed such a change until I injured my shoulder skateboarding a couple years back. Now I can feel the aches in my left shoulder as it gets close to winter, not the most pleasant of greetings but I’ve gotten used to having a little reminder of the changing seasons. I prefer the change honestly. My family would rather forgo each winter and remain in summer twelve months out of the year, that shit would drive me insane honestly. Seasons are supposed to change, if everything remained the same we’d basically be in limbo. I like seeing the snowfall on a cold winter night, encasing everything in a thick pale blanket, or when that same snow melts in the spring and the little tulips and flowers begin to bloom and life comes back to the flora and fauna. All four seasons are here in Massachusetts and I wouldn’t trade seeing the changing landscape for anything.

There’s a sense of urgency this past fall, as though a date was missed and now mother nature is rushing to catch up to herself. We were still wearing short sleeves by the end of October, only stopping to bundle up at night simply because Jared and I spent long hours standing outside. I still saw birds gathering on my lawn who were startled away as soon as I opened the front door to head out to my car. Little rabbits were in abundance and causing trouble as they darted out in front of vehicles at alarming paces only to stand on the other side of the roads flapping their gums. One night while I was over Jared’s house we stepped out to his front yard to go for one of our lengthy walks in order to soak up the warm weather one last time before the season ended and we would be huddled in his back yard over a handle of vodka. As I walked

around my car into the street I was greeted by a fox strolling up the street toward me, not charging me just walking along minding his business.

“Hey there’s a fox right there.” I yelled to Jared who by now was stepping out into the street without a care.

“Yeah man, he’s not bothering anyone”, Jared replied casually while he continued down the road. I caught up to him and walked past the fox, wondering where it was headed. Like every sensible person in East Braintree the fox didn’t have time to be a bother or inquire about someone’s business, he had places to go and things to do. I felt like this fox could fit right in with our little group of misfits, I kind of wished we could invite him for a stroll and a chat. He trotted up the street some more but soon took a right onto the sidewalk across from Jared’s house and went into someone’s backyard. I continued down the street with Jared, thinking about all three of us as prowlers in the night. We were just as devious as he was and we all knew to mind our business around here.

Across the river from the Quincy shipyard and the USS Salem, Jared and I usually take a walk down to the Fore River viewing spot behind the Braintree Electric Distribution, “the BELD spot” we call it per the company’s acronym. Walking from his house a few blocks away we usually will stuff a couple beers in our pockets for the trip and sit down by the rocks if the tide isn’t too high; sometimes the tide gets right up to the foot of the hill making it impossible to get down to them unless you walk around through the bushes and god only knows what’s waiting to ambush you in there. If we’re lucky we can sit down on the wet rocks undisturbed.

“Watch out for the needle right there” Jared says as he moves the bush out of the way to shimmy across the makeshift wooden walkway leading to the rocks we will soon climb down to

reach the sand. I look down at my feet and sure enough there's a hypodermic needle resting by the rock right where you would normally step before walking on to the block of wood.

"Shit" I whisper to myself as I see the instrument and pass over it. I ponder the users reasoning as to why he picked this spot to do his business. I think the answer lies in the same reason we came out here, it's quiet, secluded yet not removed from the world but every night you get that feeling that no one was going to come and bother you. Just the kind of environment a junkie needs. I figure we're not too different from the source, here we are with our own vices in our hands and sitting in solitude listening to the miniscule tide pet the rocks on the shore. We're not much different from them I suppose, junkies and the like. We're just some group of adults looking for some escape from the rest of the world and the tranquil nature of this pathway seemed fitting.

This place may not be pretty to most, in fact I've heard quite a few people say that this place is boring and ugly, but that's because they don't live here. When you've had to look at the same environment long enough you either begin to hate it, appreciate it for what little it has to offer or both and I find myself on both ends quite often. I ignore so much of my surroundings and take them for granted but whenever someone tries talking smack about this area I immediately defend my land as though I were the arranging my soldiers in a phalanx. I envelope myself in this area, it's in my skin and I don't think I'll ever get it out of me. It's a crude environment we live in around here, never being able to advance forward with our lives and just working to keep what little we have. Despite the impotence and stress that the residents, including myself, subject ourselves to I'm still more comfortable in these surroundings than in any other surroundings.

The Blank Generation

I've always heard that the American Dream was about building something up to be passed down for your children to take the reins, how do you do that when you haven't necessarily built anything? My father's been a truck driver for over twenty years now, he's worked for different companies but he's been with FedEx Freight for the last sixteen years and I came to the company three years ago to work on the loading dock, mostly because I was desperate for money.

All the other truck drivers ask me when I'm going to step up and be a truck driver like my dad and I give them the same answer every time, "Never." I tell them this because the day I become a truck driver is the day I put a bullet into my brain. I would never want to be one because then I will have wasted all my time here in college and put myself deeper in debt for no reason. Telling my parents that I do not want to be stuck doing hard labor all my life is like talking to a brick wall because they think what I want to do won't work out. It's because of them that I am even here, they wanted me to get an education and get more zeroes on my paycheck. How am I supposed to find that working hard labor? But that's what they expect of me, because that's the type of upbringing they had and they figure I will carry it on.

* * *

My father's father was the epitome of a working man, he was a carpenter for forty years and, even though I abhor this cliché, he built almost everything he had with his bare hands. I never met my grandfather on this side of the family, he died February 15th, 1995 which was about two months before I was born.

My father and cousins all shared stories about how great Grandpa Dave was and how he filled everyone's life with laughter and joy. I wish I could share in the fun but honestly, he is

nothing more than a concept to me because I never met him. Whenever I'm being a "wise-ass" as my father describes it, he'll remind me that I am exactly like his father and later say how much Grandpa Dave would love me because I'm just like him. It's hard being compared to someone who has passed away and who you never met, you get told this by the people who knew them because they miss that person. I can't even call him just Grandpa, I've always just referred to him as Dave-O or some variation.

I used to ask my dad a lot about Grandpa Dave-O just because I wanted to know him better and connect with my dad. There were always comical stories about Grampa; one of my favorites, especially once I got to college, was always this story about how he went to school for his own degree so he could teach woodshop at a high school and the last class he took before he got his degree was a speech class. He was at least forty years old by then, the oldest in the class and their last assignment was to take an object out of a box and develop a story around that object. Dave-O picked out a shoe horn and luckily, he was able to speak last that day. After everyone had finished, Dave-O had his story down to a T and he came up with this absolute bullshit story about how a man named Horace Horn invented the shoe horn because he was crippled or something and needed an easier way to put his shoes on. Everyone in his class later asked him "was that story true?" or "I never knew that!" I'm sure Grampa Dave was quite proud of himself that day. I'm fond of this story myself honestly, I've always seen it as the working-class older man besting the younger college kids who could afford college. The working-man always has a few tricks up his sleeve and Dave-O was full of surprises as everyone tells me.

Other than a few separate happy stories about Grampa Dave, most of the stories my dad told me about him were actually kind of upsetting. I seem to remember the sad stories more so than the happy ones. I suppose I like to hear about the sad ones because those memories we

recall how it made us feel a lot better, that's why my father always told me "life ain't all kitten hearts and rainbows". My dad talks pretty freely about the sad moments too, I don't think they bother him because they made him into the person he is today. Looking back on all the stories he told me the most heartbreaking ones to me are definitely when his father was stricken with cancer and became delusional from the morphine shots he had to take.

Dave-O was an amazing builder; he built a bunch of end tables, bureaus and desks for our family and many other families all across Massachusetts. You can always tell which ones he built because they're always heavy as all damnation and they have a crack in the wood up the side of the piece. He also built the house he raised his family in, the house I grew up in across the street in Randolph, his summer house down in Cape Cod, and many other houses. His structures still stand to this day and I'm amazed at the work because I know I can never build such a fortification. I think his work ethic has been passed down to all of his children and grandchildren. I think this ethic lives inside me as well.

* * *

The traits that are passed down from our family members strike fear into my heart someday because there's been a lot of destructive tendencies in my family tree. My father's eldest brother was a heavy drinker who was, as my dad described it, "miserable when he was drunk and miserable when he was sober." His last wife was also an enabler because she'd give him just enough alcohol to keep him functional and satisfied, even then he was still a miserable jerk, especially to his kids. She finally kicked him out one day and he lived in my grandmother's basement until she had to kick his ass out as well which was not an easy thing for her to do to her eldest child. He lived in an elderly housing community after that, being able to live there because he was over sixty years old and it was affordable. He died around Christmas 2015, my father and

I and some of his siblings had to clean out the apartment so it could be sold, because I doubt the landlord cared if some old dude died, that place was going to get sold come hell or highwater. That apartment looked like a tragedy; bottles of vodka and diet cokes lined the miniscule living room/ kitchen, puke stains on the floor, an end table with change on the floor from him playing quarters, and a pitiful mattress in the bedroom.

I remember feeling a tension in the air between me, my father, his brother and sister and their spouses. I looked at it all as the family secret being exposed and we were there to get rid of the evidence. There were so many vodka bottles on the floor and in the sink that I didn't even bother in counting them, it felt like every one of them was laughing in my face saying "I took one, I'll keep coming for the rest!" I was twenty at that time and I had just started getting into drinking with my friends, something I dodged all through high school simply because no one wanted to hang out with me. I look back on all of those bottles as both a stain on my family and a reminder of where each of us can all end up if we fell off the wagon.

At the end of Paul's wake, my family was going to meet at my grandmother's house to get together and have pizza from Lynwood's, our favorite pizza and a hallmark of our family get-togethers. A big group of my cousins went down to the bar "to pick up the pizza" but really, they just went there to drink at the bar. The irony was not lost on me here. Here these people were, lamenting over the death of someone who just died from the very thing they were sipping on at the bar.

The characters were the drunks in our family that have taken over Paul's throne. My dad's brother John who smells like the countertop of a dive bar from 1975, you know back when you could still smoke in bars? John had an entourage of people in tow when he went down to the

bar that day, all consisting of the family drunks; a couple of his cousins, John's adult kids, and some of my cousins went there along with my older sister.

I can picture them all sitting in that dive, sipping beers and mixed drinks, laughing that they'll have just one more after the four they've already had and clanking them in a half-assed toast to Paul whom we looked down on all our lives because of his alcoholism but now they were acting like he was their best friend. I'm not afraid to admit I looked at Paul a lot differently once I understood why he was always just a bit ruder than you'd like him to be. It is fucked up to judge your family in such a way but if you don't recognize these faults then you are doomed to follow in their path, next thing you know people will be making phony toasts in your name while you're lying in a coffin.

* * *

My mother has always told me how much I take after her father, Frank or Papa as I always called him. He is the grandparent I probably spent the most time with in my life because he lived right next door to us the last eight years of his life. Frank was a real character in my eyes, he worked hard labor until he was seventy-six years old and his job involved carrying a window on his shoulder up a rickety ladder to install them on houses. Now to many people that'd be an amazing feat but to me that's scary, especially considering how much my mom says I take after Papa. I look a lot like Frank for sure, I have his dry wit and absurd amount of knowledge and his incredible "shut up and do it" work ethic. I do not want my life to turn out like Franks however. Having to work all of my life in back-breaking labor even when I'm am close to eighty-years old is the nightmare that is becoming a reality for so many within the working class. Even people's retirement funds will not cover the increase in living expenses, particularly if you live in Boston or just outside of the city.

My father only went to college because he got a hockey scholarship for Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, he dropped out after six months. I don't think college was ever going to help him find anything he really wanted to do, in fact I don't think he knows to this day what he wants to do. I think he just wanted to be what he is today, a father and a husband because that was the one thing that made sense to him once he met my mom at the age of eighteen. I think after dropping out of college, and not having much direction in his life he had found something that made sense to him. I think that gives his life more clarity than my own.

Between me and my older sister Jordan, I'm the first in my family to go to University, which I transferred to after three years at a community college in Brockton. She went to the same community college as me and we both dreaded it there but I don't think she had a clear definition of her resentment. She just took her Associates degree in Business and went on her way not knowing what she wants to do. I suppose that's what makes her a lot like my dad, as everyone likes to remind her, and I really hope she can find something as concrete as my father had found in my mother.

* * *

To set the record straight, I don't look down on anyone who works in the working class. It's the world I have lived in my entire life and it has made me who I am and I do not know who I would be if I weren't born in this world, I know I would hate that kind of person. I just do not want to be trapped under the palm of society and forced into a life that doesn't bring me true joy. Since I've been working in school and met a lot of like-minded individuals, mostly professors, I've learned a lot and felt a sizeable drive in me to continue learning. I do not want to stop learning and I feel as though I will not find that similar feeling working on the loading dock through winter, spring, summer and fall. All I have found there is routine and boredom as my job

only consists of starting up a forklift, opening a truck door and clearing it out, bringing the pieces of freight to their respective locations. The only change to my job is the weather and the people I work with who basically come and go with the cycle of the moon.

I was raised on believing in traditions and following the blueprints of other people's lives and I think in my spare time I learned to shun these expectations. I've found it's better to disappoint people rather than bend to their idealization of your life, you're the one living it not them. I think back to the day where I finally felt like I was in control of my life, the day I told my parents I didn't want to move to Florida when they said that they planned to after I graduate. What's worse was they wanted to move to some gated community which is the antithesis of the environment that I grew up in.

Florida has always been my parents go-to vacation spot and while Disneyworld was fun back when I was six years old, the vacations there got boring when I was in high school. I look back on those vacations and wish I could have stayed home and had the place to myself for some peace and quiet, a luxury I didn't value enough as a young boy. The strangest bit I've started to realize was that those weren't really vacations so much as they were them just shopping for areas to live in. Staying in those gated communities made me look at my own hometown a bit more fondly. I remember each house looking the same, fenced in pools in the backyard, alarms on the back sliders and no fences so you had to see all the neighbors while you tried to ignore them and they ignored you. The whole area made me sick to my stomach.

"You despise change Ryan" is all I've heard my father tell me since my day of revelation and to some degree that is true, I think the change in Florida would be an awful change. All that Florida has to offer is a warm place to bury my body, why would I want to live in a land that was meant for those who are dying? I've always preferred the uncertainty of living in Massachusetts;

the changing seasons, the chaos of my neighborhood, the work ethic of everyone and just the attitude is very much ingrained in me and I don't think I would be the same person if I wasn't raised in this culture and swallowed by it. I probably wouldn't like that person very much if I met them. I say this coming from a standpoint that has been developed through all the happenings in my life and the environment I grew up in, who knows what I would think had I been raised differently.

So, when I told my folks flat out that I would rather live here than be subjected to the flat, hot and dumb landscape that is Florida I think it troubled them not because it was a silent "fuck you" to them but they were scared because they don't know if I'll be set up here in Boston. They wanted to move to Florida because it was cheaper to live down there than it is up here and me wanting to remain here probably made them concerned for my well-being and my future. I still have no clue what I am going to do staying here on the South Shore but I know being here brings me much more clarity than living in a place all to alien to me. I know if I end up dying here than I died where the world made sense.

* * *

The main goal in American society is to find a career rather than have a job that barely pays the bills. The problem millennials face is that there is nowhere to find a career and even with a college degree people usually end up settling with a life that doesn't allow them to get by comfortably and makes them miserable. I doubt that my mother wanted to be a secretary and I certainly don't think my father wanted to end up being a truck driver but that's all he could settle with because otherwise where would we live? No well-paying jobs are going to want to hire them because they do not have college degrees. That is where I'm at now; working my ass off,

hoping to find something better in this degree and not end up in the same back-breaking job for the rest of my life.

My friend Jared and I constantly ponder our placement in the world and what our future holds. “We’re going to get a piece of paper and then what?” is the question he usually poses for me as we have this conversation in his backyard most weekends. There’s no sense of hopelessness in his voice, just inquisition as though he is asking society what the hell he can do with this degree rather than asking me. He’s posed this question multiple times when I’ve asked him how his schooling is going and each time it lingers in my mind just a little bit longer. What the hell are we going to do with these pieces of paper? More importantly, why does it determine my level of expertise in this certain field? I don’t consider myself even a novice scholar in the field of English; my syntax is off, I couldn’t figure out how to use a comma to save my life and proper grammar and speaking just ain’t my forte kid. It’s weird trying to be scholarly coming from my background.

When Jared first started attending community college, the same one I attended, he’d explicitly state that his mom practically forced it on him, because to her he was nothing but a bum without a college degree. The only time I have ever heard him speak about what he was going to do for a career was when he told me “I’ll just move to New Guinea, teach hang gliding or some shit” as he rolled a joint for himself. While his plan conjured up a good bit of laughter from both of us, I feel in some way he would attempt to do something way out there just because he had no other plan. I don’t think Jared’s worried about his future, time will pass around him and he’ll still be just fine come what may.

No one wants to listen to the lowly people that line the streets and their stories of scraping by with the bare-minimum because people would rather ignore reality than continue to

deal with it. It's as though being from the working class has become a handicap and, in a way, it is and I think I have the best example for it: you ever go to a dinner party? A wedding or any event where you have to dress up in a suit and tie for? Well I love to get dolled up myself since it's a very rare occasion for me. So, when Jared and I were in our senior year of high school we had to go to an event called the Credit for Life Fair for our Marketing Class. The event had a dress code; suit, tie, nice shoes, the whole nine. Now when I was in high school the sporty kids in my school used to dress up nice all the time when they had a game so people were used to seeing them looking classy, Jared and I weren't like that at all. We were walking around high school looking like we just came from a shift at the plant so having to wear a suit and tie to school was a big deal for us that day.

Walking to homeroom I ran into Jared and I remember not even recognizing him when he was walking toward me, I only noticed it was him because I recognized his hard walk that made his shoulders rise and drop in accordance to the foot that stepped forward. It was surreal because I didn't even know Jared owned a suit jacket, the only jacket I ever really saw on him was his trademark Adidas track jacket which we both donned in the spring and fall. We sat next to each other in homeroom talking about how ridiculous we looked and one statement of his stood out to me, "yeah my mom made me go through like six of my ties in my closet to find one she liked", and I was shocked that he even had that many ties.

"You have that many ties in your closet? I only have this one." I admitted.

"Yeah dude, I got like twenty of them. You could've asked me to borrow one if you needed one" He explained to me. I couldn't help but laugh at this and looking back, I realize I had underestimated Jared just as unfairly as everyone else had judged him and myself. We looked like bums every day in school, the kind who wanted to start trouble and I'm sure

everyone assumed we were poor because we never had expensive clothes that they had. Needless to say, we spent our high school years close to the bottom of the hierarchy and I got bullied a lot by those kids with expensive taste and overgrown pituitary glands, Jared was usually spared this abuse because some of those kids used to buy weed off him.

One last moment of social discrimination from that day stands out in my mind. Forgetting about all the people who used to hate us looking at us differently, some with a small amount of admiration or plain curiosity as though we were a zoo animal, this one moment has been my “aha” moment in terms of finding out my place in society. Our business teacher, Mr. Belmosto, the man who brought us to this event, whom I had for class basically every day with Jared and whom I had casual conversations with after class about work, finances and sports bumped into me and in his confusion, he said to me something I’d never forget:

“Oh, sorry sir. Oh wow, Ryan I almost didn’t recognize you in that suit.” He explained before going on his way to whatever business he had to attend to. There I stood, probably not realizing it at the time, a kid who took some time to dress differently from the way he usually felt comfortable in. It’s as though my cover had been blown and everyone could see through my disguise. I know this won’t be the last time something like that happens, someone will always say “Oh you look different” when they see me dressed to the nines. I don’t like letting this working-class stature define me but it’s situations like this that make me realize where I stand in this world.

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The pressure of having to carry on traditions, find a better future for myself and live a life that my parents wanted for me has made me shun all expectations people have set up for me. My parents wanted security, they wanted my sister and I to be set up and do just fine for the rest of

our days, that is not how life works out at all. Things change, plans change, people change, things go wrong, you lose interest, you get hurt, you see some traumatizing shit, you lose a shoelace, you scuff your knees, you get in a car accident, you almost die but you keep on going. I like the chaos of life, I don't want to know what the next event will be in my life, it's much more exciting that way.

Around here it seems the American Dream is when someone works their ass off all their lives in order to move somewhere warm like Florida and die peacefully there. I look at this and think, "what a boring existence that must be." Telling yourself that all this work is going to bring you somewhere better and then have that place just be somewhere warm and uninteresting to me feels like you're just working towards purgatory rather than heaven., everyone around here seems to chase after the same kind of future as though it will fit in with their agenda. When I picture a decent and realistic future for myself it almost always ends with me at a desk in my own place with a pin board to organize myself and actually remembering things. The weather isn't a factor in my happiness, for me the American Dream is about organization and being able to get things done. I don't think my physical place is what is dragging me down, I don't have the time to yell about how I'm going to leave this town and change my life because the place isn't the problem, it's a place inside of me that I need to rid myself of. With that in mind I will say this: I'm gonna get out of this place.