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A LIFE OF WORK

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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DEDICATION

For Robin

A LIFE OF WORK

by

DAVID LaBOUNTY

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

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In the middle of my first class at the University of Texas at El Paso, the world shut down. Needless to write, an immense strain was added to an already stressful undertaking. I want to thank my professors and classmates for being a bright spot in an otherwise uncertain time, for continuing on when it was just as easy to call it quits. I didn't expect to be a student during a pandemic, but I don't think I would have made it through as well without the creative writing program at UTEP.

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PREFACE: WORKPLACE LITERATURE

Scope of the Project

In 1994, President Clinton gave a speech at the Group of Seven Jobs Conference in Detroit in which he recounted telling young people they would most likely change jobs seven times in their life.

I was twenty-six and already on my fourth post-college job when Clinton gave that speech. If you count the jobs I had during college, I was at seven. Two years later, adding up my temp jobs, I was in the low teens. Though the President was referring, in part, to the need for lifelong learning to stay employed in an ever-changing economy, those of us in the workforce at the time knew that frequently changing jobs was not just about education.

I graduated college in 1990, just as the country entered a recession, quaintly referred to as a jobless recovery. Work was hard to find, and many of my friends and I had to get part-time or temporary work to survive. We signed up with companies like Manpower and Snelling, who made it easy for corporations to staff jobs with workers that got little pay and no benefits.

Around that time, I also got involved in the zine scene. Zines have a long and rich history. Handcrafted, small-page-count booklets filled with non-commercial ideas, zines are produced by people who do not want a filter between their ideas, art, and expressions and their audience. Some point to the early 1930s and the rise of the sci-fi fanzine as the beginning of the zine, but zine-like publications can be traced back to the British chapbooks and penny sheets of the 17th and 18th centuries. Those "small, affordable forms of literature for children and adults that were sold on the streets and covered a range of subjects from fairy tales and ghost stories to news of politics, crime or disaster" were the forerunners of the modern zines, and like those early chapbooks that "mostly

proved ephemeral having been thumbed, pocketed, and passed from hand to hand" (Richardson), today's zines live brief lives.

The 1990s were a golden age of perzines: works of creative nonfiction about love, life, work, travel, and even the meaninglessness of it all. My favorites were *Duplex Planet*, *Guinea Pig Zero*, *Cometbus*, *Thrift SCORE*, *Mystery Date*, and any publications that celebrated the Riot grrrl movement. I spent hours reading the hundreds of reviews in *Factsheet Five*, the Sears Wish Book of zines, even if I did not have the spare dollar or two to send the artists for copies of their issues.

While falling into and experimenting with my own zines, I found myself drawn to a specific subset of the genre: work zines. I was into *Dishwasher*, a zine from Dishwasher Pete, whose goal was to wash dishes in all fifty states and write about it; *McJob*, an artful and hilarious send-up of daily work; and *Temp Slave!*, to which I had the honor of contributing. My go-to zines, while I was struggling to find my place in the workforce, were those by people who wrote about or bitched about or even celebrated a job.

I have always been interested in work. "What do you do for a living?" is a ubiquitous question, one that not only allows you to learn what it takes (or took) to get the particular job done but how the work affects a person and their relationships. It is not about whether the waitperson's struggle is more important than a computer programmer's or a miner's job more dangerous than a teacher's. Most jobs are worth studying and celebrating, and we often learn about a person through learning about their job.

Work-related zines were a fantastic way to read about what other people do for a living. Yet, as time went by, I grew tired of reading first-person screeds about shitty work, and I began craving fiction where work was a character, which is why I started searching for stories where work was woven into the plot, what I would call workplace stories, where the job was an integral

part of the protagonist's story and not a cudgel to beat into the reader an overtly political message about workers' struggles.

However, as much as I enjoy reading work-related fiction, I am not a fan of writing it, or most other types of fiction, for that matter. Despite brief forays into work-related nonfiction, my early focus was mainly playwriting and writing for children. I began classes at the University of Texas at El Paso on the nonfiction track, but most of my initial classes were in fiction, and in nearly every course, I wrote work-related stories that bordered on autofiction. My first thesis proposal detailed a collection of workplace fiction, with a bit of autofiction and nonfiction thrown in for good measure – my version of a workplace zine. Fortunately, my director pointed out that my thesis was a little unfocused, and I needed to simplify my direction.

And then two things happened in quick succession that helped me hone in on my current creative nonfiction thesis path: 1) In Professor Cárdenas's Advanced Creative Nonfiction class, I reconnected with an author I enjoyed in my youth: George Orwell, and 2) I found a vintage paperback of Orwell's essays, *A Collection of Essays*, at my local used bookstore.

Though I was drawn to Orwell's nonfiction pieces in this collection and in class, which I will touch on later, I still wasn't sure what track I wanted to take for my thesis. Then I read his last essay in the collection, "Why I Write." It is a short piece written in 1947, just three years before his death, but it felt like he was writing what I was thinking seventy-five years later.

In "Why I Write," Orwell outlines his four motives for writing:

1. Sheer egotism
2. Esthetic enthusiasm
3. Historical impulse
4. Political purpose

I want to set aside motives one and four, though I suffer from both (even if I attempt to avoid political writing in my works, which Orwell deftly points out is itself a political act). Motives 2 and 3, however, speak almost perfectly to my writing style.

Esthetic enthusiasm pertains to finding beauty in the world and even enjoying the physical structure of a book. But the main characteristic is a "desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed" (316). There can be beauty in work, but I also feel that all job experiences are valuable, especially in the development of a person or character, and should not be overlooked.

In defining historical impulse, Orwell only writes that it is a "desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity" (316).

For my thesis, I wanted to write the true facts of my own experiences for posterity. I wanted to focus on workplace nonfiction, where work is, for good or bad, a defining moment in a person's life, not so much for the collective. So, I decided to write about the jobs I have had that have shaped me, and continue to shape me, into the person I am today (which leads us back to Orwell's first motivation: sheer egotism).

And like most every zine that inspired me, the primary purpose of *A Life of Work* is to encourage people to tell their own tales. There is nothing groundbreaking about the work I have done (and continue to do), but by sharing my stories, I hope to spark other workplace remembrances, be they stories about slogging away for fifty years on one job or having multiple rewarding careers. The work we do has an enormous impact on the people we become and the stories we tell.

Framework

Once I had the idea about what to write, I wanted to know what came before – how my work would fit in the historical context of workplace literature and creative nonfiction.

In the introduction to their anthology, *American Working-Class Literature*, Nicholas Cole and Janet Zandy define working-class literature as "a literature of resistance, endurance, and struggle" (xix). The bible of working-class literature, Cole and Zandy's 900-page tome traces the poetry, short story, novels, autobiography, memoir, drama, reportage, oratory, manifestos, letters, oral history, documentary, speeches, and songs from the early 1600s to 2005 created by or about workers who have or had "the relative lack of economic and political power" (xx).

The works collected in this anthology are fascinating moments in American history as seen through those whose labor built the country. From Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century to Upton Sinclair in the nineteenth and Langston Hughes in the twentieth, readers are presented with poems and reportings of the progress of work.[1]

Cole and Zandy focus on the worker in working-class literature, and while I am interested in the class clashes associated with working and how they are presented in art, I am more fascinated by the everyday struggles affected by the workplace. How does the job impact the worker's interpersonal and *intra*personal lives? Where are the stories where the workplace was a character that has as much effect on the protagonist as their family or friends? To answer those questions, I found myself first turning to fiction.

[1] I borrowed the structure for my thesis from *American Working-Class Literature*, which is divided into seven eras of America's history, beginning with "I. Early American Labor: Bound, Hard, and Free 1600s-1810s" and ending with "VII. The New World Order and Its Consequences: 1980s to 2005." Coincidentally, there are seven sections of my thesis, which begins with Part 1: Child Labor and ends with Part 7: TBD, though the number of sections also is a nod to President Clinton's 1994 speech.

Unfortunately, there is little fiction represented in Cole and Zandy's book.[2] There is an excerpt from Upton Sinclair's famous novel, *The Jungle*, the book best known for giving us improved meat inspection laws. Herman Melville is afforded his due, but surprisingly, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is not mentioned in the text; the editors instead choosing to represent Melville's labor writing with the short story "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," which is more about the social inequality between two diametric socio-economic classes than working.

But Melville's story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street," was what I was looking for. It is a simple tale of a lawyer whose business is doing so well he has to hire a third person, Bartleby, to copy his documents by hand. One day, Bartleby refuses to work, uttering the now famous line, "I would prefer not to," when asked to complete a task.

What amazes me about "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is how similar the office dramas of 1853 are to today's cubicle craziness that I write about in Part 6 of *A Life of Work*, The Cubicle Years. I used my experiences as an editor in an office setting to write about workplace politics in the early 2000s. Melville may have tapped into his work experience as a clerk to tell a story that not only serves as a history lesson about the type of work available to people one hundred and seventy years ago, it is an eerie reflection of attitudes that are still prevalent in today's work culture.[3]

Almost one hundred years later, James Thurber published another workplace story that would profoundly affect my literary development. I initially read "The Catbird Seat" in eleventh-grade English, and even though I was a decade and a half away from my first cubicle job, I saw myself in the dedicated and vice-free Mr. Martin.

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[2] The workplace can be found in many novels, though television seems to be the medium for workplace fiction. Sitcoms have found humor in the workplace, from the writers' room of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* to the surgical tents of *M*A*S*H* to the bar of *Cheers* to *The Office*, as well as pathos from cop shows to medical dramas.

[3] I also would consider Melville's *Moby Dick* a workplace novel, one that was created from his own experience working on whaling ships.

"The Catbird Seat" is the story of Mr. Martin, the head of the filing department at F&S. A model employee, Mr. Martin is bullied for two years by Mrs. Ulgine Barrows. Finally, Mr. Martin has enough and decides to "rub out" Mrs. Barrows. Yet, once inside her apartment, a plan begins to form, which, when put into place, leads to Barrows's removal from F&S without Mr. Martin having to lay a hand on her.

It was Mr. Martin's sudden switch from murder to the perfect plan that delighted me; the mouse defeating the lion made me cheer, and it is mainly centered in the confines of the workplace. It has been one of the few stories from high school that stuck with me.

In addition to "The Catbird Seat," I would consider Thurber's more famous short story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," a workplace tale in which Mitty fantasizes about the jobs that would bring his life more excitement and meaning.[4]

Although Melville and Thurber helped me find the workplace in fiction, I wanted to focus my thesis collection on creative nonfiction, which is where the vintage paperback of Orwell's *A Collection of Essays* came into play.

Though it is understandable that George Orwell, a Brit, is absent from *American Working-Class Literature*, Orwell is known for his working-class writings. In the introduction to the 1954 Doubleday edition of his book, *A Collection of Essays*, Orwell is praised for his writing about workers: "Probably no one in English literature before had written about workers . . . with such clear-sightedness" (i).

1984, which I had the surreal obligation of reading in tenth grade English – in 1984, and *Animal Farm* are certainly considered, among other types of fiction, working-class novels. Yet, I believe Orwell's more famous workplace pieces are "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant,"

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[4] Interestingly, Thurber is not included in *American Working-Class Literature*, possibly because of his concentration on fiction or because his focus is on the workplace and not class struggles.

two essays about his days as a police officer in Burma.

Neither pieces are overtly about the job. For instance, in "Shooting an Elephant," found in *A Collection of Essays*, we learn little about the day-to-day functions of his job as the sub-divisional police officer of the town of Moulmein in Lower Burma; however, in presenting this one task – shooting a rogue elephant that has gotten loose in a marketplace and killed a man – we learn a great deal about Orwell and his feelings toward the job, the land he is working in, and the people who do not want him there:

> "Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that, you see the dirty work of Empire in close quarters" (155).

Orwell's essays were the clear nonfiction literary link I was looking for when I decided to write *A Life of Work*, but finding additional inspiration proved difficult. Nonfiction does not have a decades-long history of workplace writing.

Take, for instance, Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*, a collection of essays from the classical era to the early 1990s. Curated by Lopate, the book begins with writing from Seneca, Plutarch, Kenko, and Ou-Yang Hsiu and includes all the familiar names of the genre: Montaigne, the "patron saint of personal essayists" (xxiii), Samuel Johnson, Virginia Woolf, Thoreau, Thurber, Baldwin, and Didion, to name a handful.

Lopate gives the book a linear structure; however, he also provides two additional categories for the reader: By Theme and By Form. Form includes headings such as Analytic Meditation, Letters, Memoir, Newspaper Columns, Reportage, and Valediction. (At the time of this book, Creative Nonfiction was a relatively new term.)

As for themes, Lopate includes essays about Life, Death, Drugs and Alcohol, Education, and Friendship. There are essays on Food and Marriage and Music and Arts. There are even five essays on Walking. But not one essay about work is included in this collection.

Without Lopate providing clear examples of workplace essays, I returned to *Temp Slave!*, the zine that started my workplace writing journey.

In late 1994, Jeff Kelly was a temporary worker at an insurance company. He was initially hired with the promise of full-time employment, but after two years, they decided to let him go. In response, Kelly wrote a small zine, *Welcome to the World of Insurance: An Intro to Corporate Hell*, and passed it around to the full-timers at the company. From that one-off zine sprang *Temp Slave!*, a zine that provided a voice for angry temporary workers across the world.

Temp Slave! ran from 1994 until the early 2000s. In 1997, Kelly collected some of his favorite essays and comics in *The Best of* Temp Slave!. Most of the pieces are from Kelly (published under his pen name Keffo), but he also included fantastic essays from Dishwasher Pete, Little Joe, and Debbie Goad. They wrote about the rage, bitterness, futility, despair, and, above all, humor that comes from working in a time of corporate downsizing and weakened labor unions.

Rereading the essays after a couple of decades, the rawness – or intimacy – that I was attracted to in my youth feels a little juvenile now. Even my first workplace essay, which appeared in an issue of *Temp Slave!*, now comes off embarrassingly snarky. The essays are still creative and entertaining, yet they also seem to be missing the maturity I was hoping to bring out in *A Life of Work*.

Fortunately, I found a model for creative nonfiction about the workplace in Thomas Lynch's essay, "The Undertaking," assigned to us in Professor Cárdenas's Advanced Creative Nonfiction class.

In the first two paragraphs of "The Undertaking," Lynch tells the reader what he does: "I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople," "I sell caskets, burial vaults, and urns for the ashes," and "I do flowers on commission" (Williford 334). Lynch continues, using stats and folksy language, to describe his job as an undertaker. And once the reader understands what he does for a living, Lynch shifts gears to talk about the people – and the dead – around him. Though he never strays from the job, as he points out when he sits with Mrs. Hornsby, whose husband has just died: "I go for her – because she still can cry and care and pray and pay my bill" (Williford 339), it is not just about work. It is a reflection on family and friendship in relation to his occupation.

Thomas Lynch's "The Undertaking" is a great blueprint for my thesis. It is not only an example of Lillian Robinson's proposition that "honest" literature "should help us learn about the way things are, in as much depth and fullness as possible and by any means necessary" (Cole and Zandy, xix), it is a guide to going deeper than just what your job is about.

Now all I needed to figure out was how to add depth to my writing and incorporate insight and wisdom into my essays.

Poetics and Assessment

I had my idea and my inspiration. What I needed next was how to write essays that would be considered creative nonfiction, essays that were entertaining and possibly inspiring, but, above all, essays that were honest. My first hurdle was writing about myself, a subject I am not all that comfortable exploring, especially publicly.

Though lacking in workplace essays, Lopate's book is not without value for my thesis. In his introduction, he breaks down the difference between the formal and informal essay and places the personal essay, the hallmark of which "is its intimacy" (xxiii), in the informal category.

Putting intimacy on the page is difficult, but Lopate's definition of a "familiar" essay, "the more personal, intimate type of informal essay," gave me the freedom to write in my preferred humorous style, with more of the intimacy that was missing from my earlier writings. The familiar essay "deals lightly, often humorously, with personal experiences, opinions, prejudices, stressing especially the unusual or novel in attitude and having to do with the varied aspects of everyday life" (xxiv).

The snarky humor I hid behind in my early essay for *Temp Slave!* was transformed into the more subtle, self-deprecating humor found in my essays "Zen and the Art of Temping" and "Time Off For Good Behavior" (though creative nonfiction, especially when dealing with the workplace, shouldn't be free from all snark).

Comedy has its place in creative nonfiction, but I wanted to add even more depth to my essays. For help with that, I turned to *The Situation and the Story* by Vivian Gornick.

Gornick uses her experience from fifteen years of teaching creative writing classes to give the readers examples of essays and memoirs that show the situation (plot) and the story (insight and wisdom). Her book is broken into two main parts: The Essay and The Memoir. In each part, Gornick presents pieces and her commentary in an educational style.

But the introduction provides the most insights into writing personal narratives. For instance, she lays out an essential roadmap for memoir writing in the first few pages:

1. Structure imposes order
2. Order makes the sentences shapely
3. Shapeliness increases expressiveness
4. Expressiveness deepens association (4)

Perzines like *Temp Slave!* often lack structure and shapely sentences that deepen the

association between writer and reader. And though most zinesters follow Gornick's advice to "engage with the world" (14), her caution to strive not to fall "into the pit of confessionalism or therapy on the page or naked self-absorption" (10) is often not heeded.

My next hurdle was making my pieces entertaining, figuring out how to add creativity to my nonfiction.

"Roundtable: What Is Creative Nonfiction? Two Views" is a fascinating article that attempts to define creative nonfiction from two points of view: Brett Lott, who studied under James Baldwin, and Lee Gutkind, founder of *Creative Nonfiction*.

Lott writes that we practice creative nonfiction to try to preserve the magic, the truth, and the experiences that make us human. I appreciate his points that "creative nonfiction can take any form, from the letter to the list," and "creative nonfiction is not solely, What happened to me today, and why is it important?" (194).

Gutkind notes that creative nonfiction is writing nonfiction in a literary way, "using scenes, dialogue, description, first-person points of view" (201). This is an important point, but tricky. It is like writing a colorful police report that would be inadmissible in court: facts mixed with feelings or observations. A writer documents an event they have experienced, like working as a paperboy or shooting an elephant, but inserts themselves into the proceedings. The piece succeeds as creative nonfiction when we learn a little (or a lot) about the author, as well as the subject matter they have chosen to write about.

Another piece of workplace nonfiction that does an excellent job of writing in a literary way, and like Lynch's "Undertaking," rises above the simple retelling of a day's work is "SantaLand Diaries" by David Sedaris.

Initially read on National Public Radio in 1992, David Sedaris's "SantaLand Diaries"

epitomizes workplace literature. The piece is about Sedaris's adventures as an elf named Crumpet in the SantaLand area of Macy's Department store during the height of the 1990s recession. Having recently arrived in New York, hoping to get a job as a writer on *One Life to Live*, Sedaris has to take a job as Santa's elf, and through the essay, we learn about his job duties, such as running a cash register, taking pictures, and keeping kids and their parents entertained while they wait an hour or more to sit on Santa's lap. Most people have encountered a mall elf or two in their lives, but Sedaris does a great job of exposing it for the dirty job it is.

Sedaris's piece is full of humor, most of which has not aged well, and though he does not seem to understand tense shifts, I admire his essay's structure. He uses short bursts of information – snapshots of the job – that when assembled, show an interesting picture of the author, as well as the eccentric customers and co-workers he comes in contact with. I attempted to use this structure for my essay, "Read All About It!." I also strove to inject the type of humor found in "SantaLand Diaries" and *Temp Slave!* in several of my pieces, including "Three-Month Vacation," which closely mimicked the end of Kelly's own two-year temp journey.

Unfortunately, there has been some controversy surrounding the veracity of "SantaLand Diaries" (most of Sedaris's creative nonfiction tales, it seems, are considered more "relish" than real).[5] Imparting a little about yourself while entertaining the reader is an admirable goal, but being honest is paramount. There is a trust between writer and reader you should not break, which is even more important when writing creative nonfiction, a trust I strived to achieve with my essays.

I subscribe to Gornick's tenant that "the narrator in memoir must always be reliable" (14), with an emphasis on Orwell's desire to uncover "true facts" (316) when writing about historical events.

[5] "In a lengthy investigative article for *New Republic* magazine in 2007, writer Alex Heard fact-checked Sedaris's output and found that he had invented characters and concocted important scenes in some pieces" (Farhi).

But it is not just about refraining from embellishing. Memory is a tricky thing. How can I expect to be a reliable narrator when writing about jobs I had almost forty years ago, much less four years ago?

I was given my first camera when I was ten. We had just moved to Korea, and my father – a decent photographer in his own right – gave me a way to document what he knew would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And I took pictures of everything – friends and places, events and people – pictures that I still have to this day. Over the years, I have had dozens of cameras and have taken thousands of pictures, many of which helped me reconstruct scenes from my past.

In addition to my pictorial history, I began documenting my daily life during high school and continue to do so to this day. And although the early years are not as detailed as one would expect from a more experienced writer, there is just enough information to reaffirm memories.

I also have been fortunate enough to have friends and family, especially my wife, Robin, available to verify incidents, fill in holes, and sometimes correct the record.

There is no temptation for me to add relish to my essays, no desire to spice up history to make it more palatable for readers. Work can be painfully dull, often monotonous, but that does not mean it is not an interesting subject worthy of documenting as it occurred.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, broadcaster, historian, and author Studs Terkel is best known for his oral histories, especially those of working-class people. One of his most famous books, *Working*, published in 1974, is a collection of these histories – individual stories about professions that show meaning can be found in even the most mundane job. In the graphic adaption by Harvey Pekar, Paul Buhle, and a host of artists, these oral histories are brought to life through more than just words.

In his preface, Pekar writes:

> "The so-called normal aspect of human existence is underemphasized in every form of literature, yet that is the aspect that most readers are familiar with and can most easily identify with . . . But just because one writes about everyday life doesn't mean it is uninteresting; in fact, I find it most fascinating, because it is so seldom written about" (xi).

Pekar permits me to write about work without forcing it to be more than it is.

The graphic edition of *Working* also aided me with my descriptions.

I am not a visual writer. Dialogue is where I live, and I knew I would need to work on my descriptions for these essays. As I wrote, I visualized how an artist would represent my jobs, as the artists in this book do – how they not only add details to the foreground, but the background, as well – then I would use that picture to create the scene with words. I used this technique to enhance my essays about teaching autistic children in D.C. and decorating sixth-grade desks and cubicles.

Another book that helped me visualize my own workplaces is Carol Taylor's *The Job Thing*. "What is it that makes a job 'shitty', anyways?" She asks in the introduction to her book, a collection of irreverent, humorous, and often angry comics about terrible jobs Tyler had after graduating with an MFA in art. Is a shitty job teaching art to eight-year-olds? Is a shitty job working in a frame shop? (Is a shitty job searching for a septic tank on the side of a mountain?)

Like *Working,* which is a collection of individuals' work experiences, Tyler's book has an episodic structure, though Tyler's work stories are her own, with bits and pieces about other people in her life. And though the purpose of the collection is to commiserate with other people who have had shitty jobs, the reader learns about Tyler through her work, a technique I used for my essays.

In my thesis, I set out to trace my jobs from sixth grade to the present, but as I was putting the parts together, I realized, like Orwell, I was writing about more than the labor for which I was being paid.

Through the act of writing about my jobs – some shitty, some not – I have found myself examining relationships I have, or have had, with family and friends. I believe what Bret Lott wrote in "Roundtable: What Is Creative Nonfiction? Two Views" holds significance in my writing: "What creative nonfiction is will reveal itself to you only at the back end of things, once you have written it" (193). I began my thesis recounting my jobs, but I found myself reflecting on those around me, and in my desire to share workplace experiences, I have discovered a bit more about myself.

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A LIFE OF WORK

a collection of essays

PART 1 – CHILD LABOR

Self-Employed Sixth Grader

The Shortest Yard

The Working Hours

"Read All About It!"

Self-Employed Sixth Grader

"Hey, kid. I'll give you a quarter if you bring me that ball."

It was the spring of 1979, and I was playing in the front yard of my family's quarters, which ran parallel to the seventh fairway of Camp Walker's golf course. The camp sat at the base of Mount Apsan in the city of Taegu, in South Korea, just 225 miles south of the thin line of razor wire that separated us from over a million North Korean soldiers.

At that point, stranger danger won't enter my lexicon for two more years, when my father is assigned to the Pentagon and we are living in our first civilian house nestled in a seemingly safe neighborhood in Alexandria, Virginia. It was the picture of suburban bliss, except for the night someone tried to break in while I was babysitting my little sisters or the time I was walking back to the house after dropping off my youngest sister at her bus stop and a car pulled up next to me. The passenger asked for the time, and I knew from the look in his eye I better bolt, and I did like a frightened rabbit to the safety of my best friend's house.

But those events are a couple of years away. Now, all I had to worry about was spotting North Korean spies (clue #1: They don't wait for change when buying cigarettes) and not home invaders or probable child predators. So, the man asking me to retrieve a little white ball from my side of the fence that separates the fairway from my front yard in exchange for a quarter seemed like a no-brainer. And then, after the handoff of plastic for silver, I'm struck by the idea of the easiest money-making venture of my young life. I abandoned the game of war my friends and I were playing and raced to my bedroom.

If I had to rank periods of my life, the two years I lived in Korea would be very near the top in terms of best time ever. I was living in a strange and beautiful land when I was old enough

to know what was going on and young (stupid) enough to think I was invincible. It helped that I never felt safer, on or off base, despite being a foreigner in a country that was only twenty-five years removed from a civil war that technically hadn't ended.

Of course, it wasn't a time of nonstop magical moments. Being caught between bases during an air raid was terrifying (we didn't know it was a drill until later), as were the days that followed President Park Chung-hee's assassination; all of us kids were sure a North Korean invasion was imminent.

I also got into my share of troubles of my own making. There was the time I exploded a can of spray paint on the side of the school gym, creating a ten-foot plume of gray paint, because I wanted to see what made that clicky-clicky sound, or the first and last time I uttered a racial slur while playing basketball during recess. I thought I had invented a clever turn of phrase, but instead of appreciation from my peers, I got a history lesson from my sixth-grade teacher that had me bawling.

And I stole money from my parents.

Most of the time, it was spare change from my mother's purse or a dollar here or there from my father's wallet. It was the twenty I took one day that didn't go unnoticed, and neither did the flashy new Han Solo blaster I brought home – a full-size replica that lit up and made *pew-pew* noises when you pulled the trigger. My explanation of where I got it didn't fly with my mother, and I immediately cracked under the interrogation of the missing money. The penalty for my crime was that I had to give away the blaster, and I wasn't allowed to attend the field trip with my classmates to see *Star Wars* at the off-base Korean movie theater. It was a punishment so fitting and so devastating that I never stole another cent from my parents.

But that golfer's simple request gave me the perfect idea to make my own money, a sure-

fire plan to be rolling in plastic toy blasters and whale blubber gum.

Golf courses are almost as ubiquitous as tank or fighter jet monuments on military bases. There are over 230 of them spread across more than 800 military bases across the world, and they are all required to be self-sufficient; they are not supported by taxpayer money. The courses not only provide a little rest and recreation for officers and enlisted men and their families, these large swaths of open land also serve as defensive positions and as areas that provide easy access in case all hell breaks loose.

Camp Walker's golf course was unique among the handful of military bases I had lived on in my young life because the fairways were less than twenty yards from our front doors. The entire housing section was wrapped in a wreath of green, and the only thing protecting the windows of our cars and houses was a fifteen-foot chain metal fence. We were constantly bombarded by errant golf balls, and I quickly learned that "Four!" was not just a number after three; it was our version of duck and cover.

That word also meant new balls for my collection. I had a dresser drawer full of dimpled shrapnel, and now I had a plan for what to do with them.

I told my dad my idea, and he helped me find egg cartons I could use to display my golf balls. I made a sign that read 25¢ a ball, but when my father inspected my product, he told me they were too nice and to charge more.

After changing my sign, I gathered my wares and set up shop on the tee box of the seventh hole, which was less than a hundred yards from my front door, just a few steps from the side of our elementary school. I didn't have to wait long for my first sale. Before lunch, I sold two dozen golf balls; by the end of the day, I had made over twenty-five dollars. My enterprise was a success.

I sold my entire golf ball collection that summer, and I never ran out of product. Though

military personnel may be good at war, they usually suck at golf. But they do know how to have fun, and they loved to see me. I became a fixture on the seventh hole tee box. The enlisted men appreciated my deals, and the officers teased me for running out into the fairways and stealing their perfectly hit balls so I could sell them back at outrageous rates. I'd smile and laugh along because they were officers, and I wanted their money. But my best customers were the Korean businessmen who practiced their English on me, usually asking to touch my dirty-blond locks, and showered me with ₩100 (won) coins.

Between foursomes, I would clean my balls in the washer and scour the tee box for unbroken tees, which I gave away with every ball purchase. I spent so much time on the golf course that summer the golfers started asking me the best way to hit the ball to avoid the traps and the front yards, which I was more than happy to help out with, but later realized it was not the best business strategy.

Business waned when the camp replaced the little chain metal fence with a four-story mesh net that kept even the worse duffers from losing their balls, but I made over one hundred dollars that summer. It was a job that kept me out of trouble, taught me how to interact with adults, and sparked my appreciation for a game that would give me decades of bonding with my father and grandfather.

It also wouldn't be the last time I made money on a golf course. There was that crazy summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college that I spent as a fry cook and cart wrangler at a public golf course in Virginia. Though not counting all the day-old hot dogs I could eat, I'm pretty sure I made more money selling golf balls in Korea. I certainly had more fun.

The Shortest Yard

"Hey, kid! I'll give you a dollar for every yard you give us!"

The crowd laughed, and I just smiled and said, "Sorry."

I turned back to the field and waited for the next play.

The crowd settled down, and I didn't hear anything more from the man, but I anxiously waited for the ball to be hiked.

It seemed to take forever for the game to restart. Suddenly, the players, who were frozen one second, became a mass of frantic movement. The offense made a first down, and once the whistle blew, I ran to where the referee placed the ball and planted the back marker parallel to it on the sideline while my co-worker took his rod ten yards away until the chain became tight, marking the point of the next first down. And the waiting began again. At least we had moved far enough down the field from the man in the stands who made the request, but my stomach was in little knots. It was only the second quarter, and I wasn't sure if I would make it through the rest of the game.

* * *

It was the fall of 1979, and my buddies and I were at Camp Walker in Taegu, South Korea, heading to the youth center, looking for something to do.

The youth center was a magical place created to keep the soldiers' kids occupied after school and all day in the summer, so they could be the best soldiers they could be.

The youth center felt enormous. It was crammed with pool tables and ping-pong tables, board games and pinball machines. I spent the majority of my hours in that building playing pinball. I may have needed a step stool to reach the flippers, but I was a wizard; I had a high score

on a couple of the machines. It was the one sport I excelled at, one that didn't require above-average height or bulging muscles to play well.

The youth center also was where everyone signed up for intermural sports.

Intermural sports were important on military bases. There wasn't a season that went by when kids weren't playing some form of organized ball. There was basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. Football kicked off in the fall, and soccer fields were filled in the summer. It was another way to keep camp kids occupied, and since our coaches were usually childless enlisted men, it was a way for the Army to teach them how to lead in non-military exercise (though the way some of us played baseball, it could still be considered a live-fire exercise).

Basketball was my sport of choice, but I wasn't bad at soccer. I wasn't a star, but being small and quick served me well in those sports, but not baseball. I was okay in right field, and I could throw a straight fastball – even if calling it "fast" was polite at best – but I couldn't hit to save my life. My bench-warming skills, however, were top notch.

The one sport I couldn't participate in was football. I was too short. And thin. And short. While my friends were donning helmets and shoulder pads to take the field in battle, I was stuck inside, playing a mean pinball. But this particular football season was different.

When we arrived at the youth center, they had just put out the signup lists for the new season. While my friends scrambled to the hanging clipboards to fill the sheets of clean white paper with their names and hoped-for positions, the director made an announcement that they were looking for kids to be in the chain crew, the rod men who assisted the head linesman by holding the down markers and chains on the sideline. You had to be in sixth grade and willing to work every Saturday for the next eight weeks.

And they paid five bucks a game.

I signed up, then raced home to ask my mother if it was okay.

* * *

The job was simple. We ran up and down the sidelines after the whistle was blown to end a play, placing the markers where the officials told us. We learned how to line up the down marker with the ball, even though it was often placed far away from us in the middle of the field; how to pull the chains tight; how to run out onto the field when the first down was too close to call (my favorite part because we became the center of attention – an invaluable cog in the machine – while my friends in shoulder pads had to stand by and wait); and most importantly, how to abandon the sticks when the players came close to crashing into the sidelines.

What they didn't teach us was how to handle hecklers.

Most of the time, during intercamp games, the crowd was polite, if not indifferent, to those of us working the sidelines. Players on both sides of the ball went to the same school and lived in the same neighborhood. Some opposing players even had the same parents.

But as the season neared the end, teams from other camps in Korea and even neighboring countries would come to play against our boys, and that's when the stands would get a little mouthier.

They would argue calls, complain about the "hometown" officiating, and bribe little rod men. In this instance, the man who offered to supplement my salary was a parent from the team that lived on the Army base in Okinawa.

I took my job seriously, and I was good at it. I felt I was a vital part of the officiating team, and I was getting paid for my performance. Five bucks was civilian-kid money, the kind they made mowing lawns and doing chores (we assumed – chores and lawn work were taken care of for us on the base, so we rarely had the chance to make a few bucks doing menial tasks around the house).

The idea of cheating was so foreign to me, when the bribe was made, even if in jest, it hit me like a punch.

After the bribe, I tried to redouble my focus on the game, tried to be the best rod man I could be, but for some reason, I was having a hard time shaking the man's words. Would I cheat? Had I ever cheated without knowing? Had I ever moved a marker a little further up to benefit my friends on the field? What would happen if I were caught? My head was swimming.

Suddenly, during a stoppage in play, a hand rested on my shoulder.

I froze. A voice whispered in my ear:

"You're doing a good job, son. Here's some money. Buy yourself a hotdog at halftime."

Then a hand slipped a bill into my front pocket.

Clarity came to me in that moment. As did rage. I would never take a bride, and I was furious that this man would just assume I would.

I spun around and reached into my pocket, prepared to fling the money back in this man's face, to show the world that I may be young, but I wasn't a cheater.

The man stood there smiling down at me, and it took a moment for my eyes to clear. Then I recognized the voice that had spoken to me only moments before.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, as the anger drained from my body to be replaced with embarrassment – and a little confusion. My father didn't spend Saturdays in the stands watching me play. He used to coach my basketball team when we lived in Fort Leavenworth, but since we moved to Korea, I couldn't remember him coming to any of my soccer or baseball or even basketball games. And here he was, watching me work my first job.

"You're welcome," he said. "See you at home."

The rest of the game went smoothly. I don't remember who won, but that's the sign of a

good rod man. You concentrate on your job so much that you don’t let any external noise – like the score, the time, the players, or hecklers in the stands – distract you from your one job: mark the down and distance for the next play.

The Working Hours

Most of my summers were set aside for moving from one military base to another, but when we arrived in Virginia in 1980, my father was able to keep his family in one place while I marched my way through high school. By the time I could drive, it was assumed I'd find a summer job, but before I had my license, there was no pressure, and I was already starting to sour on the idea of making money for a living.

On the other hand, my friend, Lee, was always coming up with get-rich-quick schemes. One year, right before summer break, Lee thought it would be great if we went into business mowing our neighbors' yards. Unfortunately, we lived in a neighborhood of townhouses, and everyone's "yards" were just scraps of grass about the size of a kitchen table.

When we first moved in, my father bought an electric lawn mower and edger, the kind of machines you plugged one end of a fifty-foot orange industrial cord into and the other into one of those outdoor outlets usually used for Christmas lights. It took all of five minutes to mow the green postage stamps. The hardest part was making sure you didn't roll over the cord, electrocuting yourself or shorting out a row of townhomes.

Lee offered our services to our neighbors, and we actually got about five customers – though none of them were next to one another, and we couldn't stretch the extension cord across yards that we weren't mowing, so there was a lot of pushing the powerless machine from one side of our neighborhood to the other.

We charged five bucks a lawn, and every other Saturday, we were out there mowing and edging. Until two weeks later, Lee decided it was too much work, and I suddenly found myself spending most of the day – and the rest of every other Saturday that summer – doing yard work.

A few months before, in the spring, just a month removed from the last snowfall, the head of the neighborhood association "hired" Lee to sweep the three cul-de-sacs that made up our neighborhood, and Lee roped me into helping him.

It would be an easy twenty-five bucks, he told me. All I had to do was help him sweep the streets free of the sand and pebbles that were laid down so cars could get in and out of the neighborhood when it snowed.

We'd had a lot of snow that winter, and the blacktop road was brown and crunchy, like a dirt road in the country that seemed to go nowhere. The sand had to be removed because it would destroy tires and paint jobs, but instead of paying a street sweeper to clean it up in a day, the neighborhood association thought it would be cheaper to buy a couple of push brooms and pay some kids to sweep their troubles away.

It sounded like a quick twenty-five bucks, but after the first hour – and third blister – we realized we were in over our heads.

We worked until dinnertime but barely uncovered a couple car lengths of dirt. The next day, I showed up with bandages on my palms and gardening gloves, yet Lee was nowhere to be seen. He had bailed, claiming he had too much homework or some such lie, but I stuck with it, and every day after school until dinner for three weeks, I pushed sand up and down the streets in front of our townhomes.

Street weeping is not a glamorous job, and without someone to share in the pain, it's downright depressing. Halfway through the second afternoon, I dropped my broom, went back home, and returned with my Sony Walkman.

* * *

My dad was a bit of an audiophile when I was a little boy. There are several pictures of us

laying on shag carpet-covered floors in long-forgotten military quarters, each wearing a pair of white headphones, with earpieces the size of ostrich eggs that swallowed my head whole, jacked into his silver reel to reel.

At some point, he parted ways with the reel-to-reel. I guess moving from base to base every two years made it difficult to keep up with the bulky machine and his collection of magnetic tape, though the headphones were still in use when I went to college. He switched to albums in the mid-seventies, but when we moved to Korea, everything went into storage, and I didn't see them again until my college girlfriend visited me one summer after my father had taken command of an Army depot in California.

She stumbled across his record collection and was immediately impressed. Though a Southern girl born in the last year of the Sixties, she was hippie through and through. She was a social worker in training who boycotted nuclear power plants, marched in D.C. for the homeless, and wore a red POW bracelet for most of the nineties.[6] Her musical heroes were Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul and Mary.

Though very much anti-war, she liked my father the moment they met, and her respect for him grew as she flipped through his records. Dylan also was one of my dad's favorites, as were Simon and Garfunkel, Mamas and the Papas, and Peter, Paul and Mary. Up to that point, I had little idea about my father's music taste, past or present.[7]

As a teenager, I experimented with music in my room. I spent hours listening to the radio with my Panasonic portable cassette tape recorder close by the speakers. I'd hear the first few notes

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[6] When my mother dropped me off at college in Alabama, she said, "Just don't bring home a Southern Belle." I did not, and she's only recently forgiven me for listening to her.

[7] I remember spending hours studying the cover of my father's copy of *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. I didn't know much about Elton John's music, but the art was mesmerizing. When I bought my first Elton John album home in the 1980s, *Too Low For Zero*, and showed it to my dad, all he said was, "Elton hasn't had a good song since the seventies."

of a song I liked, then rush to push the Record and Play buttons at the same time. I had cassette tapes filled with songs that started in various spots, always annoyed when the DJ would talk right up until the moment the singing started.

I liked a wide range of music. I was into the Top-40 hits of the day, but I also enjoyed the soft rock songs I first heard on the 8-track tapes my parents made us listen to on cross-country road trips, like Barry Manilow, Evie, and Jim Croce.

I also loved classical music and John Williams-conducted soundtracks[8], and because I had continued my saxophone studies through college, I followed any band that featured a sax player (I worshiped Clarence Clemons). Every song with a sax riff became my favorite – I once recorded and rerecorded Stevie Wonder's *Sir Duke* over an entire tape, hoping to get the perfect, uninterrupted, first-sax-note-to-last-sax-note version.

The radio in my room was rarely off. Music was in the background when I read, when I did my homework, when my friends and I played *Dungeons and Dragons*, and I fell asleep to music every night.

Music wasn't just background noise; it became a part of my being. I listened to it, I studied it, and I played it. Music didn't always bring me joy – I hated practicing the saxophone every afternoon – but I quickly learned it could save me from the mundane.

Like sweeping silica off the street.

* * *

I needed company during those lonely working hours pushing the broom, and I sought it in the sounds of my favorite band at that time: Tears for Fears.

From the first tinkling of the triangle on "Shout" to the seemingly nonsensical lyrics and

[8] The first cassette I bought with my own money was the soundtrack to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

epic melody of "Listen" (*Come on, my chicken, what do you have to say*???), I was lost in a world of sound that made work pass by so much easier.

My sweeping matched the monotonous driving beat of "Shout" and "Head Over Heels," and I would listen to "The Working Hour" over and over to try and figure out the notes to the saxophone solo at the beginning. But no song made me happier than "Everybody Wants To Rule the World." The moment that sweet synthesizer riff rolled out of my headphones, all my worries seemed to melt away. My muscles didn't ache, and I had a little more pep in my step.

I went through three push broom heads, four sets of batteries for my Walkman, and a cassette tape of *Songs from the Big Chair*. In the end, I was paid what Lee was promised: a hundred dollars.[9]

And from that time on, music accompanied me on almost every job. I'd make mix tapes for lawn mowing – loud, bass-driven songs that I could hear over the whirling blades – and I'd lose myself in easy-listening melodies and classical music to calm my nerves while I delivered the *Washington Post*.

As I got older, I realized it wasn't just monotonous jobs that called for music. Music was the soundtrack for most of my workplaces. Whether teaching children or editing documents in a cubicle, the melodies helped me focus; they silenced the extraneous thoughts that would clutter my head and make it hard for me to get the job done. To this day, I can't write without background accompaniment,[10] and I know I'm in the zone when the album ends, and I don't even realize it.

Eventually, though, the silence will creep in, and I find I can't continue working until I turn the record over or click shuffle, and I'm again lost in the music until the job is done.

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[9] And he was only going to give me twenty-five. I should have known then he wasn't the best friend he claimed to be.

[10] Roland and Curt even got me through this piece.

"Read All About It!"

Local Boy Falls Asleep In Class

"Kenneth, please wake up David."

It's 1985, and I'm a senior in high school. It's around 11:30 am, and I'm nodding off in Ms. Gifford's English class. Before Kenneth can poke me in the shoulder – a move he's made several times over the last few months, my eyelids flap open, and I stammer, "H-here!" though attendance had been taken thirty minutes earlier.

There are a few snickers, but my classmates are used to my dozing off mid-lecture, and most are too focused on their own issues to care. We're not Ms. Gifford's best and brightest students. By luck or design, her fourth period is a motley crew of freaks and geeks, and Ms. Gifford, a small white-haired woman who looks like a hip Mother Goose, understands well who she is dealing with.[11]

The lecture continues, and I shift in my seat, trying to find a position uncomfortable enough to make me stay awake. It's not that I find the class or Ms. Gifford boring. Though English was never in my top seven favorite courses, I was doing well. It helped that we were reading books I enjoyed, those written by my favorite Arthurs – Conan Doyle and C. Clarke – and those that featured Arthur – *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *The Once and Future King*.[12]

At the beginning of the school year, after the second time I started snoring in class, Ms.

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[11] We weren't troublemakers or outcasts. We were the kids who had our own weird friends and small cliques that orbited around but never near the more popular student bodies. We were misfits, majoring in shop, cosmetology, and *Dungeon & Dragons*. Kenneth, the "coolest" one in class, was the lunchtime DJ for the school's radio station. He played all the alternative bands and Pink Floyd deep cuts that most kids hated. And yet, somehow, this collection of introverts and athletically adverse slackers won the volleyball tournament during Twelfth Grade Field Day at the end of our senior year, shocking our six-hundred-student class.

[12] I'm only now realizing that our reading list, full of science-fiction, mysteries, and Arthurian tales was probably curated to keep the attention of students the administration determined were not destined to further their education.

Gifford stopped me while the other kids headed to lunch. With concern in her voice, she asked if I was feeling well, and I apologized, telling her I was tired because I was getting up at 4:30 every morning to deliver the newspaper.

I didn't have to say another word. Ms. Gifford seemed to understand. She didn't tell me to get to bed earlier or try sleeping on the bus or any class but hers. She just nodded, and that was the end of it.

Paper Boy

Several months earlier, on the bus ride home from school, a kid who lived a few streets over asked if my friend, Lee, or I wanted to take over his paper route. He was a year older than us, a senior, and was looking to hand off his route before he left for college. With summer just around the corner, Lee was looking for a way to make some money, and he jumped at the chance.

"What about you?" the kid asked me.

I wasn't so enthusiastic. It sounded like work to me, so I tried to beg off, but my friend was a master of manipulation, and I was easily goaded into agreeing to show up at five the next morning on the corner where the bus had dropped us off.

My parents were impressed with my initiative – I failed to express my initial lack of enthusiasm, making it sound like the whole thing was my idea – and I was suddenly up with the sun, standing on the corner, hands in my pocket, looking like a Lost Boy cast out of Neverland.

Lee and the kid showed up a few minutes later, followed by the arrival of a large nondescript delivery truck.

The truck pulled up next to us, and the driver got out. The kid introduced us as the new paper boys, and the driver didn't seem impressed. He opened the back of the truck, the accordion

door making a screeching racket as it rolled up, revealing stacks and stacks of newspapers tied with clear plastic twine.

The driver threw down nine bundles, and the kid dragged them to the corner and stacked them in three columns, each three bundles high.

The driver tossed me and Lee pieces of beige canvas, then grabbed ahold of the strap above his head, dragging the door down as he jumped off the back bumper. He disappeared around the front of the truck without uttering a word and rumbled off into the morning.

The kid showed us how to flip the bundles and snap the clear twine in two with thumb and forefinger, releasing the papers from their bonds. Then he explained how to put our canvas bags over our heads. They were like those saddle bags you see in Westerns, only these had two open pouches, one in the back and one in the front, and they smelled like sweat and ink.

He dumped a handful of rubber bands in the pouches over our bellies and then showed us how to take a paper from the stack, fold it in thirds, slip a rubber band around it, and put it in the pouch, and so on. The trick, he told us, is not to load all the newspapers in one pouch at a time. You have to spread them out between your front pouch and back pouch, or you will end up tipping over.

I thought he was kidding. He was not.

After almost tipping over because I overloaded the front of my bag, the kid showed me how to spin the bag around my neck to fill up the other side.

We loaded up as many newspapers as we could and followed the kid to the first row of townhouses, stopping at the third door.

Our neighborhood was divided into courts, circular sections of road that branched off a main court. We didn't live in one of the post-war neighborhoods planned on a straight-line grid.

The streets in our neighborhood looked like they were designed by a sleepy one-year-old with a crayon.

Each court held about ten rows of townhouses, and most rows consisted of seven to nine homes, with a small green space between each row. Lee and I lived on opposite sides of one such row.

The individual townhomes looked similar but different. The doors and shutters of each were varied slightly in color, and the rooflines differed in places, but all were three stories, two stories above ground and a full story below, which was not considered a basement because it opened out to the tiny fence-enclosed pieces of land generously called backyards. The fronts had a bay window, which signified the kitchen, two windows on the second floor, and a front door with three to ten stairs leading up to it from the sidewalk.

The kid took out a rolled-up paper and tossed it up to the front door of the third townhome; it fell perfectly on the small "porch" without hitting the door. That was all there was to it, he told us. Then he handed each of us a scrap of paper with a list of numbers on it and told us those were the homes of subscribers and to meet back at the corner when we ran out of papers.

I finished tossing papers in no time, almost always hitting the intended targets, and when we met back at the corner, the kid collected our bags and told us we could go home. When I questioned him about the remaining stack, he said they were for the houses on the other side of the lake and that he would deliver them by himself.[13] We had done enough for one day and were free to go.

* * *

The next morning, I struggled to get out of bed. By the time I got to the corner, the

[13] I should have known something was fishy. The route included real houses outside our neighborhood, which would be the toughest part of the job. He was smart to hide that from us for as long as possible.

newspapers had already been dropped off, and the kid was loading up his bag with folded papers.

He smiled when he saw me, relieved, and when he asked me where Lee was. I told him he probably wasn't coming.

Looks like it's just me and you, he said.

A month later, the route was all mine.

LaBounty's Pond

Our neighborhood was cut out of the woods of a small town called Springfield in Northern Virginia.

Founded in 1847, Springfield was an idyllic landscape just ten miles from George Washington's Mount Vernon and twelve miles from Washington, D.C. Springfield was rural crossroads until 1946 when developers arrived to create housing developments around the newly built state highway, and by the 1980s, it had become a sleepy suburb of the Nation's Capital.

My family lived in a brand new, at the time, townhome-filled subdivision built next to Huntsman Lake, a 28-acre lake that looked like a cartoon whale. The lake was a little over two miles long, stretching from Huntsman Road to a thirty-foot natural damn that we would sled down and onto the lake's surface in the winter when the ice was thick enough to walk on.

The lake didn't have a shore and wasn't big enough to float a boat on, but any day of the summer, you could find a couple of kids, and some fathers, fishing for tiny bluegills from the cattails by the water's edge.

The road from Huntsman Road to our subdivision ran along the side of the lake and was barely lit, so my early morning walks from the townhomes to the houses I also delivered papers to was in near total darkness.

Every morning, I would say goodbye to the streetlights in my neighborhood and cross into the darkness next to the lake. I walked several football fields with only the sound of frogs and bugs outlining the water's edge before I reached the shortcut that sliced through the thick woods, separating the lake and the houses on my route, plunging me even further into the inky black.

I was terrified of the dark. My parents bought me a novelty headlamp to help me see in the woods, but I never used it. I was more afraid that someone could see my light and sneak up on me, and I really didn't want to know what dangers were lurking in the branches. So, I would hurry through the trees on the narrow path newspaper boys before me had scuffed into the ground, only feeling safe when I emerged on the other side under a streetlight shining on the cul-de-sac that held the last of my route.

Some mornings, fog would roll off the water, blanketing everything in an eerie gauze. Those mornings were still and wonderfully quiet, the only sound coming from my newspaper bag softly slapping against my legs.

And though I hated the dark, I loved to look at the stars. There were mornings when the sky was so alive with pinpricks of light I didn't need street lamps. I would try and puzzle out the planets in the early morning sky, and for several weeks in the winter, I would delay returning home after delivering my last newspaper with the hopes of catching a glimpse of Halley's Comet. Once or twice I thought I saw it hanging above the horizon, but it wasn't until I brought along my father's binoculars that I could clearly spot the telltale tail of ice and debris that somehow made the dark feel a little less scary.

Monday's Paper is full of . . .

Monday papers were easy to deliver. Depending on the news cycle, I could fit ten or twelve

in each pouch.

Tuesday papers, which contained follow-up stories and editorials from Monday papers were always a little thicker. My sack could hold maybe fifteen Tuesday papers, without having to return to my drop-off corner to pick up more.

Wednesday papers were usually thin, but Wednesdays came with stacks of pesky inserts for grocery store coupons and other color ads that had to be crammed into the middle of the papers. Stuffing papers with these inserts took extra time, though they didn't make the papers too much thicker.

Thursdays were my favorite day of the week. It was near the end of the news week, and the papers were thin and easy to fold. I could easily stuff two dozen Thursday papers in my sack, allowing me to finish my route in half the time.

Friday papers were hit and miss. They usually had a bit more bulk because the Arts and Entertainment section was filled with things to do over the weekend, but if it was a slow news week, Friday papers could be as easy to carry as Wednesday papers.

You would think that Sunday was the worse paper day. If you lived in a big city during the golden age of print news, you know how large Sunday editions of *The Times* (L.A. or N.Y.) or *The Chicago Tribune* or *The Washington Post* could get. I couldn't fit more than four or five Sunday editions in each pouch, and considering most people only wanted Sunday subscriptions, my route was doubled. It took me almost three times as long to make my Sunday rounds than on Wednesdays.

However, Saturdays were brutal.

Every Saturday morning, I would wake up and deliver the standard Saturday edition, which was about the same size as the Tuesday edition. But, Saturday afternoon, just before dinner, I

would return to my drop-off corner, where I would receive stacks of Sunday inserts.

The Sunday inserts included the classifieds, ads, comics, and the Arts and Entertainment, Lifestyle, Business, and sections. Any information that wasn't time-sensitive was printed for early delivery.

Customers were never happy to receive half their Sunday papers on Saturday evening, but that's how big the Sunday edition of *The Washington Post* was – it literally took me two days to deliver it.

LaBounty Collection Agency

The worst part of the job wasn't the early mornings, the darkness, the ink-stained hands, or falling asleep in class. By far, the worst part of the job was collecting money from subscribers.

From what I remember, I had to pay for the papers dropped off at my corner. *The Post* would charge me a fixed fee for the papers each month, and it was my job to collect the money from the subscribers to cover that fee. I got to keep anything I collected over what I had to pay *The Post*, and if I came up short, I had to make up the difference out of my own pocket.

It was a brutal lesson in economics, and it was often a struggle to get paid, but I never came up short.

I had to open my first bank account because subscribers wrote checks to me, not *The Post*. Say a subscription cost $10 a month, if I got a check for the full amount, I'd have to pay eight or nine dollars to the post, keeping the rest for myself. Now, if a customer liked me and wrote me a check for $12, I got to keep the extra money (or it could go to making up the customers who stiffed me). I basically worked for tips, so I made sure the paper was delivered early and where customers expected it.

At the end of every month, I would include little white payment envelopes (provided by *The Post*, thankfully) with the paper. The next morning, many of those envelopes would appear tapped to the front door, and I would collect them. Some had checks, some had cash, and a few had coins.

For subscribers who didn't leave their pay for me to collect, I would have to go to their houses and knock on their doors and ask for money. It was a stomach-churning part of the job, standing in front of unanswered doors or waiting on the porch while the owner got their purse or wallet. The people who made me wait were the ones who hated parting with one thin dime, much less the cost of a newspaper subscription.

If someone didn't pay, I would report them to the paper, and they would call and collect the money themselves or drop them from the delivery route.

Not everyone refused to pay, and some were very generous, leaving me several-dollar tips. And I did like November and December. The kid told me not to send out white envelopes at the end of those months and instead knock on each door. He was right. Everyone was almost happy to see me and often extra generous. I would get small gifts and plates of cookies. One subscriber even gave me a pretty nice sweater.

But that was two months out of twelve. The rest of the time, getting paid was a slog.

Once I had the fee to cover the papers – and the boxes of rubber bands and sleeves of plastic bags I had to pay for myself – I would hand a check to the delivery driver, and we would be square until the next month.

It was quite a racket.

Hometown Newspaper

Every morning, after dragging my weary body back home, I would plop the Arts section on the kitchen table; fill a bowl with Cheerios, milk, and two generous spoonfuls of sugar; sit down and open the section to the comics; and read while I ate.

The comics section of *The Washington Post* was three full pages. There were almost a hundred strips, and I usually read every one while I slurped down my sugary cereal.

Bloom County was a classic by then, and I was really getting into the new strip on the block, *Calvin and Hobbes*. *The Far Side* made me laugh every morning, and I still read *Peanuts* with unabashed delight.

Hagar the Horrible, *Beetle Bailey*, *Broom Hilda*, *Shoe*, *Amazing Spiderman*, I read them all. I didn't care much for *Mary Worth* or *Mark Trail*, but I liked *Sally Forth* and *For Better or Worse*, and I loved the comics on Sunday.

The Sunday comics had their own section – sometimes two. There were pages and pages of super-sized full-color moments of hilarity.[14]

When I discovered my college carried *The Washington Post*, I made my way to the library's newspaper room every chance I could get to catch up on my hometown news – and, of course, the comics. The papers were a couple of days late, and it was odd reading the Sunday papers almost a week later, but it kept me from being homesick on a campus that emptied out every weekend.

When Robin and I moved to the Maryland side of D.C. after college, we couldn't even afford a Sunday subscription to *The Post*. But whenever we had a couple of extra quarters, we would go down to the corner paper box, grab a copy, and spend half the day reading it from first page to last.

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[14] I still have a folder of my favorite comics that I clipped from those pages. The now-browned paper and color-faded strips still make me chuckle.

Today, I pay for an electronic subscription to *The Post*, and every morning, when I turn on the computer, Google Chrome opens to the front page of the paper, and I'm met with the familiar masthead in Engravers Old English, just like the kind that would greet me when I would deliver the paper all those years ago.

Postscript

I came home for Christmas after my freshman year at college. One afternoon, I drove to my old high school to pick up my little sister after her last final. While waiting for her, I dropped by Ms. Gifford's class.

Not a fan of high school, I surprised myself by even setting foot inside those hallways, but I liked Ms. Gifford, and I wanted to see how she was doing.

Ms. Gifford seemed happy to see me, and we exchanged pleasantries. Right before I left, she said, "I always thought you should be in my AP class."

I was taken aback. It was the first time someone thought I was good at English.

I was on a science track in college, but her words stuck with me when I returned, and I started loading up on English classes.

I never did get to tell her how much I appreciated what she said and how much I liked the path she set me down.

PART 2 – FICA YOU

More For Your Life

A Man of Respect

Worst Western – Part 1

Worst Western – Part 2

More For Your Life

Your father comes home and tells you that you have an interview Saturday. The wife of a friend of his at work runs the Men's Department at Sears, one of the anchor stores at Fair Oaks Mall, and she's looking for a stock boy.

You think a mall job might be fun. Your aunt worked at Farrell's Ice Cream Parlour when she was in high school. You love Farrell's – the color, the candy, the birthday bowl of twenty scoops of ice cream and all the fixin's that no one could ever eat alone – and there is a Farrell's in Springfield Mall, which is just down the road from your house. This mall holds a special place in your heart because it was the first one you visited when you returned from Korea and where you recently saw your first R-rated movie. ("Wolverines!")

You're appreciative of the interview. You're about to graduate high school, and it'll be your first summer without anything to do because you just dumped your paper route on some young sucker in the neighborhood, and you could use the cash when you head off to college in a few months.

And girls hang out at the mall.

The mall is fifteen miles away, but it may as well be in another world. The drive takes you through winding country roads with nothing more than a couple of cows to keep you company. The few houses you do pass are old and look unoccupied.

Once, on the way to the public course where your father frequently took you to golf, he told you that most of the houses out here recently got electricity and running water. You find that hard to believe – you think he is pulling your leg – what with Washington, D.C., the center of the universe, only thirty minutes away. But after a few weeks passing the shacks with peeling paint

and multiple cars parked in the yards, you can see how that would be possible.

You show up to the interview wearing your Sunday pants, a button-up shirt, and a skinny cloth tie. You are told to ask for your father's friend's wife at Customer Service, and as you wait, you nervously but gently, so as not to crease, roll and unroll the sheet of paper you've brought with you. It's an anemic resume, half-filled with the work experience of a child – street sweeper, paper boy, babysitter – and when your father's friend's wife appears and you hand it to her after the introductions, she barely looks at it.

Instead, she leads you downstairs to a set of double doors that say "Employees Only" near the back of the store and into the warehouse.

You've seen bigger rooms, but this three-story open space that could fit a couple of football fields is impressive – and loud. Men in hard hats are yelling over the beeps of forklifts that are removing boxes from trucks, idling just outside the open freight doors.

Your father's friend's wife is moving through the madness at a pretty good clip, and you almost have to jog to keep up. You follow her, weaving your way through the warehouse and several unmarked swinging doors until you finally arrive in a narrow room that is still three stories tall but is barely wide enough to fit two people. There's almost no noise in the stockroom, and the space is filled with silver clothes racks in various states of repair and cardboard boxes stacked floor to ceiling.

This is where you will work, she informs you. The men in the warehouse will bring you boxes every day. Your job is to open the boxes, and if they are full of pants, organize them according to waist size and leg length in the marked spaces along the back wall. If the boxes have shirts, you are to hang them, by size, on the racks that aren't broken.

That's it. Oh, and if a rack breaks on the floor, you need to bring it back here and repair it,

if you can, or replace it with a new rack. That's the only time you are allowed on the floor. Otherwise, you will spend all your time in this barely lit dungeon, smelling of mothballs and wet cement.

She asks if you have any questions – you don't because your head is swimming – and then she asks if you can start Monday.

* * *

You arrive on Monday morning, and after getting yelled at for trying to walk through the warehouse, you go to the Men's Department, hoping to find your new boss. Instead, one of the ladies running the cash register shows you to a set of double doors behind the rack of men's extra-large dress pants that leads back to your stockroom, and you wonder if your boss pointed that out and you just forgot.

There is no orientation. You're shown where the box cutter is, and the only training you receive is don't cut the clothes when you open the boxes. Then you are left alone to your own devices.

The boxes are about six feet long and a foot tall, big enough to hold a body (certainly big enough to hold your body), and you think there is a mistake when you open the first box. Careful not to cut the pants inside or the fingers on your hand – it's the first time you've seen, let alone held, a box cutter – you discover it's full of purple corduroy pants. You wonder if these were supposed to be sent to the Women's Department.

The next box contains green corduroy pants, and because curiosity has now gotten the best of you, you start slicing open boxes left and right.

Black corduroy pants.

Red corduroy pants.

Blue corduroy pants.

The labels all say Levi, and the waist sizes say they are for men. Who are you to judge, you think, as you stack the pants and place them on their respective shelves.

An hour later, the register lady comes back and points out your mistakes: Don't mix the corduroys and the jeans; put the corduroys on these shelves, and fold them so the label is on top. Like this, she shows you, and you nod and say thanks, even though you are more than a little annoyed that you will have to redo everything.

But you push on, and the job is so mindless you work straight through lunch (there's no clock in your hovel, and you hate wearing watches because your wrists are too thin).

The register lady reappears and inspects your work. She nods and tells you she'll see you tomorrow.

* * *

You don't miss lunch on the second day. Instinct tells you when it's time to lay down the box cutter and emerge from the stockroom. At first, you are excited to hang out at the food court, but you end up sitting alone, eating a preprocessed slice of pizza and people watching.

When you get back to the Men's Department, they demand to know where you went. You tell them, and they inform you that *your* lunch is from 10:30 am to 11:00 am. Because it's your first job, you don't argue. Maybe you've been eating lunch at the wrong time your whole life.

* * *

Each day is the same as the last.

Boxes appear. You open them, unload the clothes, collapse the boxes, and put them in the corner to be picked up by, you assume, the same box fairy that brought them to you in the first place. Most of the boxes are filled with brightly colored corduroys, and some contain gaudy

Hawaiian shirts, but as the weeks pass, deep blue button-fly jeans start to appear. The blue jeans are stiff and hard to fold.

Occasionally, you are allowed on the floor, or "the yard" as you've taken to calling it, to restock the pants shelves or take a broken rack back to your cell, but you never see a customer, and days go by when you don't see another employee.

"Lunch" is even worse. It's too early for the fast food places in the food court to be open, so you bring your lunch. You can't eat in the stockroom, and it's too depressing in the food court, so you find a bench in the middle of the mall and eat your Budding turkey on white bread while old people pass by in their tennis shoes and tracksuits, never once going into a store.

You don't see one girl all summer.

You wonder if this is a job or one of those levels of hell you learned about in English class.

* * *

Unable to reach the top shelf without a small ladder or step stool, which was never provided, you've taken to using the empty collapsed cardboard boxes as a platform to climb on to reach the higher shelves.

You think your workaround is genius. But one day, as you're shoving pants on the top shelf, the box tower you are standing tippy-toed on crumbles, and you fall.

You flail around, flinging the pants from your hands as you hope to catch hold of the shelving unit, but you are clearly headed down.

Luckily, the remaining boxes have slipped into a makeshift slide, which deposits you almost gently to the concrete floor. But the force of your fall has jarred loose the shelving unit, which wasn't as secured to the wall as you assumed, and shelves collapse, raining a rainbow of colored pants on top of you.

You lay there for a moment. No one heard the noise. No one is coming to save you.

You get up, fix the shelves, and restack the pants, all while trying not to think about what would have happened if the entire shelving unit fell on you.

You leave for the day, and years later, you realize the loneliest job you've ever had was working as a stock boy in the Men's Department of Sears.

A Man of Respect

"Have you ever fucked a fat girl?"

"Not that I recall," I said, trying my best to act casual.

"Oh, you'd remember. There's nothing like the warm—"

It was the summer of 1987, and I was standing between a flattop grill and a bar with a beer tap in the pro shop/food shack of Twin Lakes in Clifton, Virginia, a public golf course less than thirty miles from the White House, but a world away from civilization.

I had just finished my freshman year at the University of Alabama and was home for the summer. I needed a job, and the Fairfax County Park Authority had an opening in the clubhouse at Twin Lakes. I had been golfing there for years. My dad and I would trek out to the countryside whenever we could and spray tiny white balls all over the fairways. My high school held tryouts at Twin Lakes, but I fell far short of the score needed to make the golf team; the course's namesakes – the two lakes that ran parallel to several holes – swallowed many of my shots. But that never stopped me from returning again and again to the course. Getting the chance to work there was a dream come true.

I grew up on golf courses. As an Army brat, I was literally surrounded by fairways and greens on the bases where my father was stationed. And when we were between deployments, waiting to move to our new quarters in some strange city, we would stay with my grandparents in Rancho Cordova, California. Every morning, I would tag along with my grandfather to the golf course at Mather AFB, the last base he was stationed at before he retired from the Air Force.

My grandfather was an excellent golfer. Born in Buffalo in 1918, Salvadore "Sam" Grisanti was sent to the family home in Palermo, Italy, when he was two. He returned to New York in 1936

and joined the Army to "escape the gangs." He fought in World War II and then moved to the Air Force after the war, where he would spend the rest of his career.

When he retired in 1968, he spent nearly every day for the next thirty years golfing at Mather, just down the road from his house. He loved golf so much that he had an artificial turf putting green installed in his backyard next to his lima bean-shaped pool. My sisters and I learned to hold golf clubs the moment we could stand on our own two feet.

I wasn't a great golfer. My arms and legs were as skinny as the clubs my grandfather had sawed down to fit me. I didn't hit the ball far, but I could hit it straight, and I could putt, thanks to hours and hours spent on the above-mentioned backyard putting green.

But I was golf course savvy. I had driven golf carts since I was seven and knew all the golfers on the PGA like most kids knew NBA players. I understood the lingo – spoke the language – and I could fill out a foursomes scorecard, adjusting for everyone's handicaps like an accountant filling out tax forms. I loved *Caddyshack*. I was confident my interview at Twin Lakes would be a hole in one. But when I arrived, I was surprised to find the job was working the grill.

The clubhouse was small, set between the parking lot and the first tee box. Golfers arriving for their tee times would place their bags in the stands outside the clubhouse door (no clubs allowed inside) and once inside, would turn left to the small counter where they would sign in with the Starter and pay their green fees. Then, if they were hungry or thirsty or just wanted to grab something to eat later, they would wind their way through the six small, round tables, each with four chairs, floating on the floor between the front door and the grill.

This was where I would work, I was told, between the bar and the grill.

I panicked. I couldn't cook. I was in college, and cold cereal was still my go-to meal. The closest I had come to using a stove top was when my mom taught me how to brown hamburger

meat and fry an egg, which, it turned out, made me perfect for the job. That and I was eighteen – not old enough to legally drink beer but old enough to serve it.

I was hired on the spot, and when I returned for my first day of work, I was schooled in golf course grillology.

In the mornings, when I arrived before the sun was up, before the first golfer was allowed on the course, I started the coffee and loaded hot dogs in the rotisserie machine. I would then turn on the grill and wait for my first order while those tubes of questionable meats slowly sweated on their rotating metal racks.

Most early morning golfers were eager to get on the course, so I usually just sold coffee and maybe a candy bar or a packet of peanut butter crackers. Every once in a while, a golfer would ask for an egg sandwich, and I would go to work toasting the bread, frying the egg, and cooking up some bacon or adding cheese if requested. The whole process took less than five minutes, then the golfer would be on their way, and I'd scrape down the grill and keep the area clean until the lunch rush.

Lunch could be a little hectic. Golfers would come in looking for a hot dog, a bag of chips, and a beer, which was easy enough, but many would want a hamburger, and the sound of sizzling fat would fill the little clubhouse for a good hour.

There were two shifts for the cooks: early morning to lunch and lunch to late evening.

The lunch to late evening shifts were the hardest. There weren't too many golfers after three o'clock in the afternoon, even during the longest days of the summer, but closing the grill meant cleaning everything, restocking, and counting out the money.

There were two perks of working into the late evening. One, you got to goof off with the golf cart wranglers and pro shop guys, who were just a bunch of college students like me. We'd

have golf cart races around the course in the twilight, the seventeen-year cicadas cheering us on with their deafening applause. We'd have long-drive contests, launching practice range balls from the first tee into the closest lake. And we got to take home all the leftover hot dogs we could eat.

Once a hotdog was cooked, they were thrown in a bun, slipped into a red and yellow striped aluminum foil bag, and placed in the warmer. Hot dogs could sit in the warmer all day, though most were eaten within a few hours. Those that lasted until closing were prized, and before heading home, we'd divvy up the leftovers and start munching on the tough strips of meat wrapped in moist buns as we headed toward our cars.

Bartending came shockingly easy. It didn't take me long to learn the perfect pour – tilt the glass, fill it three-quarters full, pause to let the beer breathe, then top it off so that you had no more than an inch of foam at the top. But the worse part of the job, for me, no matter the shift, was replacing the keg.

I could easily wrangle an empty keg out from under the bar, but I was too weak to lift a full barrel, so I would have one of the golf cart guys drive me down to the refrigerated shed where we kept the kegs and frozen beef patties and hot dogs. The golf cart guy would load the new silver can on the cart, and I'd try my hardest to keep it from rolling out while we rode back to the clubhouse.

The clubhouse was on a hill overlooking the course, so the golf cart guy would drag the new keg up the wooden stairs to the back door, fit it under the bar, and tap it for me. Every time, without fail, they'd ask teasingly, "Can't tap a keg? Are you sure you go to college?" I always gave them the first cup of CO2 and foam before they headed back to the repair shop under the clubhouse.

I loved my job.

I loved the rush of short-order cooking. After their first nine holes, most golfers would stay on the course, but a few would jog into the clubhouse and come straight to the grill to grab a sandwich or candy or something to drink before they raced back out to the course, so as not to lose their spot on the tee box.

After an exhausting eighteen, those golfers who didn't go straight to their cars to head home would saunter into the clubhouse, all backslaps and grins, pick a table, and tally up their scores. Money might be exchanged, and celebratory beers would be bought, and they would brag about their shots and shoot the shit for hours.

And that's when things could get raunchy.

Many older golfers, especially around there, were ex-military; most were war vets. After a round of outdoor male bounding and beers, the men would let their high and tight hair down. They would say crude things about the cart girls, the cadre of young ladies who would drive around the course, bringing smiles and snacks to the golfers who were too lazy to come into the clubhouse. And they would tell off-color jokes and ask young fry cooks if they'd ever had sex with large women, just to see if they would blush.

But my cheeks never turned red from anything other than standing over a hot grill. No matter how dirty those old men would get, I had heard it all before.

My grandfather was, as Gay Talese once wrote of Frank Sinatra, un uomo rispettato – a man of respect. Though his Jilly's was the clubhouse at Mather's golf course.

After golfing with my grandfather, we would adjourn for lunch. Everyone who passed by his table would stop and shake his hand, pay their respects, maybe ask a question, then move on. It wasn't nearly as impressive as the crowds that Talese wrote about – how people would amass in and around the saloon to catch a glimpse of Frank – but my grandfather could command a small

audience, our table always packed with his friends and fellow golfers.

And those audiences could get bawdy. They would tease one another and tell terrible jokes. To me, my grandfather was both majestic and humble in those post-18 hole moments, always smiling but never joining in the ribaldry around him.

When I wasn't near my grandfather, his friends would treat me with undeserved respect, saying only wonderful things about my grandfather that I only realized when I was older were spoken with the hopes that I would report the nice things said back to him.

My grandfather knew everyone's secrets because they told him. He knew who was having money problems and shouldn't be betting on the links, even if it was a dollar a hole, and who was having marital problems. But he never seemed to judge.

After one lunch, when the last man we had played golf with that day had excused himself from the table to go home, my grandfather said to me, with a hint of disdain in his voice, "Nice man, but he cheats like a son of a bitch."

"But he's a judge," I said, a little shocked.

"It's true," he said, telling me how the man would move the ball on the fairway to improve his lie or shave strokes off his score, the ultimate sin in golf.

I asked my grandfather why he didn't call him out.

Because he was a POW, my grandfather told me. In the camps, if you had diarrhea, you could be considered a liability and left for dead. When you have to steal another man's shit to survive, you get a pass on a lot of things.

My grandfather taught me it was best to listen, to learn, and to withhold judgment until you knew all the facts. He also taught me how to tease but never go over the line and how to take a joke, even at your own expense.

When I worked in the clubhouse at Twin Lakes, I was the target of good-natured ribbing, and I'd smile at the jokes, maybe even try to land a witty barb of my own, but I'd never let them see my shock or disgust. I would try my best to channel my grandfather when he held court at his clubhouse on the golf course.

Worst Western – Part 1

"Looks like I'm going home early today."

It's 1990, and I'm standing behind the front desk of a dingy motel in Northport, Alabama. It's three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and the cook has just come out to the lobby from the kitchen.

I like the cook. She claims to make the "best damn biscuits in the South," and no one disputes that. She's always sneaking me one after she makes a new batch, pushing them on me like a grandmother worried that I'm too skinny, especially for a white boy.

The cook lowers herself onto one of the uncomfortable chairs near the front door and takes out a cigarette. She doesn't light it, just holds it between her thin fingers and waits.

My co-worker and I exchange glances. I'm checking in a customer, a tired traveler who seems oblivious to the cook's proclamation.

I give the man a key attached to a plastic fob in the shape of an elongated diamond with a number etched on it. I point him to the building where he'll be staying and tell him when the pool closes. A gut feeling keeps me from mentioning the restaurant, and instead, I say, "We hope you enjoy your stay," knowing he won't.

Just as the traveler leaves the lobby, the door to the restaurant opens on our right, and a man appears with a clipboard in his hand. He looks around the tiny lobby until he spots the cook. He walks over and hands her a piece of paper from his clipboard.

"I'm shutting you down," he says. He then asks her to come back to the kitchen so he can go over the long, long list of violations.

The cook puts the unlit cigarette between her lips and takes the paper, giving it a brief look.

She sighs, gets up from the chair, and tells me to put a sign on the door. The restaurant is closed.

* * *

I smile as I tape a piece of paper with CLOSED hastily written in big black letters on the door leading to the dining area. The motel is under constant threat of losing its corporate franchise name, and the restaurant being shut down could be the final nail in the coffin. The owner is going to have a stroke.

This is not an ordinary Friday. The owner is on his way down to the motel. He's a large, menacing man who looks every bit like a stereotypical bodyguard of an Italian mob boss who has let his body go over the years. His attitude is as dark as his hair. He has a bristly mustache and a waddle in his walk.

The owner lives in New Jersey, where he and his twin brothers – who look so much like him, I thought they were triplets – own a fancy restaurant in New York City. I've only seen the twins, or at least one of them, twice since getting the job, but for three weeks of every month, the owner lives in the room closest to the office.

And he's scheduled to arrive any minute.

* * *

I've never seen the owner in a good mood, and he's absolutely fuming when he comes in for his room key and sees the CLOSED sign.

"What's this?" he asks.

We tell him the health inspector showed up, and he lets out a string of profanities. Suddenly, he stops mid-swear, and his brow furrows. He starts for the dining room, asking us if the health inspector is still here.

I can't read his mind, but I know he's considering bribing the guy.

The summer before I was hired, I heard Alabama Power showed up to shut off the electricity to the hotel. The owner hadn't paid his bills for months. But Alabama Power wasn't there to just turn off the electricity. The guys in the white truck had come with wire cutters to physically sever the lines to the hotel – and they arrived during the hottest part of the day.

The owner scrambled out of his room and offered to write a check to cover the missed bills and fines, but the guys must have dealt with him before because they told him cash or cashier's check only, with an emphasis on cash.

The owner was forced to run to the bank, and I don't doubt when he returned, there was a little something extra in the stack of bills for the men's troubles.

As for the health inspector, we tell the owner that he left just a few minutes earlier.

The owner emits another string of profanities, followed by. "I'll be in my room," and he barrels out of the lobby.

We won't see him until tomorrow night.

* * *

Some think the owner is in the Mafia.

Though he physically fits the mob profile, I'm not sure about that theory. The owner's first name is Patrick, and he sports an even more Irish Catholic surname. And yet, he says he's Jewish, which is why he disappears into his room every Friday afternoon and doesn't emerge before sundown on Saturday.

Technically, I'm Jewish. Though I grew up in the Church of Christ, my mother's mother is Jewish. She and her parents and sister escaped Danzig before it fell to the Nazis. When she married my grandfather – a never-practicing Roman Catholic born in New York but raised in Palermo, Italy – she "converted" to Catholicism because her daughter came home from school one

day and said the nuns told her she was illegitimate in God's eyes. My grandmother never spoke about her heritage or the horrors she experienced, so I know very little about Judaism, but I know you are not supposed to work on the Sabbath, which gave Patrick an excuse to hide away in his room from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. I've never questioned anyone's faith, but I'm pretty sure Patrick's not in his room studying the Torah.

And if he were that devoted to his beliefs, shouldn't he be closing the hotel and sending us all home for twenty-four hours? Apparently, almost forty categories of work are not allowed on the Sabbath, including farming, sewing, writing, cooking, and even traveling. I guess it's okay to make someone else work for you as long as you aren't the one physically renting rooms, cleaning, or cooking (that is, when your restaurant hasn't been shut down by the health inspector).

No one knows why Patrick and his brothers decided to buy this out-of-the-way, crummy motel in the Deep South. Some think the motel is a money-laundering operation, that they sell more than food up at that fancy restaurant, and they need a place to clean their money. Most think it's simply a tax write-off for the family, something to keep the restaurant running up north.

I think he's in the witness protection program.

Whatever the reason, Patrick is a horrible owner. He believes he treats his employees well, but he doesn't trust any of us. Once, he pulled me into the hallway by the front desk after I checked in a young family from Florida who had traveled up to see a football game. Afraid that I was about to be reprimanded for some credit card mistake or for not being cheerful enough, I was shocked when he told me he was giving me a dime-an-hour raise.

"Keep it to yourself," he said.

Who would I tell? A dime more an hour was not something to brag about.

* * *

A week later, the inspector returns and deems the kitchen clean enough to cook in, and Patrick is as happy as I've ever seen him. He's all smiles and tells a young couple checking in to try out our world-famous fettuccine alfredo – just like his mother makes. Then, as the sun starts to set, he heads for his room to do Lord knows what, leaving the rest of us alone to do our jobs.

I'm not my usual cheerful self when I hand the couple their key. I'm still disappointed that the owner has dodged another bullet. It's not all bad, I figure. At least I can look forward to the cook's biscuits.

Worst Western – Part 2

The boiler room is barely lit and smells of WD-40 and mold. Reggie, the handyman, a lanky Black dude with an easy-going lilt to his voice, is using the beam from a pocket-sized flashlight to point out two tiny knobs on the “finicky” compressor.

He yells over the groaning machines and banging pipes. “If the AC goes out again, just come in here and turn these knobs to the left at the same time. Got it?”

I nod and wipe the sweat from my forehead. It’s a losing battle. My entire white dress shirt is soaked through with my salty self.

“Gently, though, like you’re caressing a woman’s nipples,” he adds.

He can see by my look that his new instruction did not register.

“You’ll do fine,” he says, packing up his tools.

We both know that’s not true, but it’s two o’clock in the morning, and I’m the only hope he has to go home and get some sleep.

We trudge back to the lobby in silence. The sun set hours ago, but the temperature is still in the high nineties, and the sticky air is unmoving. Two brown wings of the motel stretch out behind us. The third wing is on our right, attached to the restaurant and the lobby.

Each one-floor wing houses twenty rooms; most have two beds, but there are six rooms with king beds. Each room has a 12” color TV with remote (well, 12 and 27 don’t have remotes, and 41 has a remote but no batteries). There’s one nightstand in every room that holds a clock radio that rarely reads the correct time, a phone that works perfectly if you need to call the front desk to complain about something, and a drawer that conceals a Bible that has never had its spine cracked. There are four towels as stiff as the bedspreads in each bathroom, which guests are not

supposed to use at the pool, but they all do; two hand towels; a box of Kleenex; one roll of toilet paper, and all the paper-wrapped hand soaps a traveler spending ten hours in a somewhat-clean room could ever need.

Several room doors are wide open, and I can hear the AC units below each front window chugging as hard as they can. It'll take a few minutes, but hopefully, they'll start blowing cold air – hell, just cool air would be great – and maybe the switchboard will stop lighting up.

We make our way past the tiny pool that desperately needs chlorine. At sundown, I locked the gate of the three-foot-high "security" fence surrounding the shallow puddle. I'm not worried about chasing late-night skinny dippers from the pool tonight. In this humidity, it's just as hot in the water as out of it.

We enter the lobby from the back, near the restaurant. The marque out front boasts a brick oven that bakes the best pizzas outside of New York City, which is really just a regular oven with four red bricks in it.

Reggie heads to the bathroom, and I go unlock the front doors. No one is waiting to get in. Everyone who was supposed to check in already did, and we're too far from the highway for most weary travelers looking for a place to rest.

I return to my spot behind the lobby-length front desk. I can already feel a cool breeze coming from the vent behind my head, and I almost smile.

My buddy got me the job at this run-down motel in Northport, Alabama, two miles from my old university dorm room. Three months ago, I was taking my last final, and now I'm standing behind a desk made of blond wood that's as sturdy as a card table.

My days are usually filled with taking reservations, keeping the lobby decent, checking in guests, and catering to their every need. But once a month, I have to take the night shift, and I'm

by myself from eight p.m. to four a.m. when the cook comes in to start breakfast. My buddy was the night manager, but he quit recently after having a gun stuck in his face for the second time in less than two weeks. He didn't quit because he feared for his life. He quit because the owner didn't believe him; he thought it was "an inside job." But we all know there's never enough money in the till worth stealing.

I'm terrified of being robbed – I lock the front doors, even when I'm not supposed to – but I need this job to make rent money before the fall when I start working as an adaptive P.E. coach at a school for developmentally delayed kids, which is just down the road. I've got one more month of putting up with cranky customers who apparently never heard the phrase: "You get what you pay for."

Reggie returns from the bathroom, still drying his hands. I meet him at the front door. He tosses the brown paper towel in the trashcan next to the door and says, "One last thing, you have to grab the nobs at the same time. If you touch one before you touch the other, the shock may – he looks at my five-foot-nothing, hundred-pound frame – *probably will* kill you."

"Got it."

I walk him to the front door.

"Have a good night," he says with a wave.

"You, too," I say, shutting the glass door and locking it.

I straighten up the stand of tourist brochures of exotic places like Moundville and Birmingham and clean up the empty coffee creamers that litter the floor below the coffee machine.

I return to my spot behind the desk and begin to separate the credit card receipts from the cash. I glance at the switchboard. The red light next to room 5 is lit, but the light's been broken since I started.

I don’t know if Reggie’s joking about being electrocuted, but I had already decided not to go back to the boiler room tonight. I don’t care if the unit goes out and everyone dies of heatstroke.

I unplug the switchboard. Four hours ‘til freedom.

PART 3 – CHILD CARE

Introduction

"Brave in the Attempt"

Student Driver

Poetry Man

Introduction

"Can your son come out to play?"

Growing up in the seventies, this was a familiar request made to my mother by the neighborhood kids. But this particular plea was made of her in 1990, just a few months shy of my twenty-second birthday.

I had just graduated college, and I was visiting my family in the commander's quarters on Sharpe Army depot, a small supply distribution base halfway between Stockton and Modesto, almost smack dab in the middle of California.

It was a desolate area, surrounded by cows and alfalfa crops. My mother, not too happy with the move (even if we were closer to her parents in Sacramento – or maybe because), told me when I first arrived that Manteca, the name of the nearest town, meant cow shit in Spanish.

The depot only housed a few families, including the commander's quarters, and there were a handful of kids who rode their bikes and played catch and war games in the one cul-de-sac that comprised base housing – much like my friends and I did on every base we lived on growing up.

My mother politely turned the kids away with the harmless excuse that I was tired or it was dinnertime, but she would always tell me, with humor and a touch of pride, that my presence had been requested. She knew my gift with kids was leading me to the other family profession: Special Education.

* * *

The original plan was to become a biochemist, but a D- in freshman chem crushed that dream.

I wandered through the course catalog for a couple of semesters, and by the spring of my

sophomore year, I found I had taken mostly English and psych classes. Because I figured you couldn't make a dime with an English degree, I declared psychology as my major.

So, I began loading up on psych classes, and when it came time to pick a focus, I felt child development was a perfect fit. When we went to the on-campus preschool for labs, the TAs and teachers were impressed with my easy rapport with the kids. The students seemed happy to see me. I was used to their reactions, having been the babysitter of choice in my neighborhood since seventh grade, and I knew why: I didn't look or act like the other "adults" in their lives.

I looked young for my age. I had the body of a twelve-year-old for most of high school and college and was often mistaken for a middle schooler. My friends and I had fun with boardwalk and carnival age-and-weight guessers who always missed my birthdate by at least five years. Doogie Houser looked more mature than I did.

What hindered my ability to get into a bar or to be taken seriously by most of my peers worked in my favor when interacting with children. They saw me as a nonthreatening authority figure, someone who was more older brother than parent. I could play kickball with them one moment and teach them fine motor skills the next. I could calm the rowdiest child and coax the quietest into participating.

Feeling good about my new path, I applied for an internship at the University of Pittsburgh. At that time, Pitt was home to two of the most influential scientists studying the recently redefined neurodevelopmental disorder in children: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It was the largest study of its kind in the world, and a select group of undergrad and graduate students were picked from all over the country to come to Pitt for the summer to study the effects of behavioral and medical treatments in a day-school setting of a hundred students diagnosed with ADHD.

During my phone interview, I was asked what I knew about behavioral modification with children. Knowing they wouldn't be satisfied with the textbook definition, I looked to my mom for the answer.

My mother graduated with a degree in education. After college, she moved to Washington and got a job as a teacher at a school for deaf children. She taught there for two years before marrying my father and becoming an Army wife.

For the first several moves, while her children were young, my mother sometimes worked as a substitute teacher on the military bases where we lived, making for several awkward classroom moments for me. After we arrived in Virginia, my mother returned to the classroom full-time as a special education teacher, and she continued to teach for the next fifteen years.

When I showed an interest in early elementary education, my mother would tell me stories about her classroom, and as my studies continued, she and I would compare educational philosophies. I used one of those stories in my interview for the Pitt internship, and I'm sure that's what got me the job.

It was a crazy, intense, exhausting, and wonderful summer. I learned more about early education in those eight weeks than in the previous three years. More importantly, my time in Pittsburgh taught me the importance of documenting your experiences.

Each teacher carried a clipboard. The clipboards held stacks of papers that allowed us to keep meticulous track of every child's every behavior. We had to write down everything that happened, no matter how minuscule or seemingly unimportant.

Even before I arrived at the university, I vowed to keep my own journal of the experience. I documented the entire eight weeks, with and without the kids. I would spend the day with the kids, the nights with my friends, and the early mornings writing it all down. I think I got four hours

of sleep each day, not including the cat naps I was able to grab in the twenty-minute lunch breaks we had away from the kids.

After Pitt, I continued on my special education path while I worked toward my degree. I got a job as an occupational therapist for an autistic boy who lived near campus, and I worked at an after-school program for juvenile delinquents, where I learned the limit of my abilities was interacting with adolescents. I looked younger than most kids in the class, so no one listened to me. I was helpless to stop one student from stapling his jeans to his thigh, just to see what I would do, and another from "escaping" the classroom.

All the while, I documented everything, from learning plans to behavioral assessments, and I filled notebooks with my own writing of classroom observations and what I was going through in my life at that time.

Those notebooks have been invaluable as I look back on the two most maddening and fulfilling jobs I've ever had: an adaptive P.E. coach at a segregated school in Alabama and a teacher's aide at a school for autistic children in Washington, D.C.

“Brave in the Attempt”

“I’m gonna need you to calm down, Coach, or I’m throwing you out of the game.”

“But they’re killing my kids,” I implored, gesturing toward the court.

The official pointed to my bench, and I backed up without taking my eyes off my players or the clock above their heads.

It was the 1991 Alabama Special Olympics State Basketball Tournament. We were in the championship game, playing for the gold in the twelve to fourteen-year-old division, and with 1:18 left on the clock, we were down 17 to 12.

We were smaller, younger, and outmatched. We needed a miracle.

We weren’t supposed to be there in the first place.

* * *

My first real post-college job, with benefits and a retirement plan, was as an assistant adaptive P.E. coach at the Regional Education Center in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

The REC, a small school with a handful of classrooms and a cafeteria, was home to the county’s special needs students. This was the early 1990s in Alabama when separate but equal was applied to developmentally delayed and learning impaired students. Inclusion, allowing disabled students to learn alongside “regular” kids, was not allowed.

So they built a school specifically for their special needs population. The district also sent us students they felt were not smart enough to spend all day in regular classrooms but not challenged enough to be considered special needs. Some of these “troubled” kids would come to us from the elementary school across the street for extra academic help and a chance to play organized sports in our adaptive P.E. program.

Despite feeling like we were the district's dumping ground, the REC was a great school. The teachers were kind and caring, and the faculty treated the students like family. But what the school was really known for was its sports program. Not only did it have a fantastic gym and an indoor pool, it had, arguably, the best Special Olympics program in the state.

I was hired by Coach G., a short, stocky man with curly blond hair and a mustache. He was hyper-religious and believed in corporal punishment. It was still legal to paddle misbehaving students in Alabama, and Coach G. had several "disciplinary tools" hanging in his office between Bible verses.

Coach G. also believed that every kid, no matter their ability, should have the opportunity to play in at least one sport, and he had built his program into a powerhouse of athletes that competed in regional and state Special Olympics meets in everything from track to swimming to bowling, team handball, softball, and basketball. Our kids competed against other kids their age and abilities across the state. They got to travel all over the state, staying in hotels and eating at restaurants. We even took our students to North Carolina to participate in downhill skiing games.

* * *

We arrived in Huntsville the day before the championship game to play in the semifinal round. Our first game was against Jess Lanier, a high school in Bessemer, and the moment we stepped on the court for warmups, one of my players asked nervously, "We have to play them?"

The "kids" across the floor from us were huge. One guy was six-foot-nine and another was six-foot-two. No way these guys were fifteen and under; we definitely weren't playing kids with our similar abilities.

The referee came up to me and asked, smiling, "What's this?"

"A possible massacre," I answered.

My little Down's student, the most positive person I had ever met, said, "I quit," and tried to walk off the court.

I had to use all of my charm, motivational skills, and bribery to get the kids to stay in the gym, but when tip-off came and my tallest player had to strain his neck to look up at his opponent at center court, I wondered if it wouldn't be best just to call timeout and sneak them out of the gym. We could simply skip the game and head straight for McDonald's for fries and ice cream cones.

Yet, when the final buzzer sounded, my kids had done the impossible.

It took a few minutes for them to calm their nerves, but after Lanier missed their first shot and we got the rebound, it became clear these may be giants, but they were slow-moving giants.

My kids were like rabbits on the court, ducking and dodging and dancing around the much larger, slower opponents.

My star point guard was a four-foot-nothing ten-year-old who dribbled circles around the older, taller boys. At one point in the game, I heard a comment from the crowd: "How old is that little girl? She's fantastic."

The whole team was fantastic that day. They out-rebound, out-shot, and out-hustled their way into a 31 to 23 win. They didn't even know what they had done until I came running onto the court to congratulate them.

And like that, we were headed to the gold medal game.

* * *

Special Olympics team competition is different from those that take place in "regular" junior or senior high schools. There are no tryouts in Special Olympics. Any child who wishes to participate is given a chance to play. At the start of each sports season, the children perform skills

tests to determine their abilities. The tests are devised by the Special Olympics committee and are intended to help level the playing field, to place the athletes in teams that can play other teams with similar skills.

For all sports, we had an A team and a B team. Coach G. was in charge of the A teams made up of older, more experienced athletes. I coached the B teams, usually the younger, less seasoned players. For individual sports, like swimming, track, and bowling, we coached all the children during their meets.

During basketball season, our A and B teams were forces to be reckoned with, and not just against their peers. Our A team was so good that Coach G. would call around to area junior high school girls' teams to see if they would be willing to scrimmage against us, hoping to give our students a chance to learn and play with other kids. He felt that some of their game knowledge would rub off on our students, making them better and more confident athletes.

And it paid off. Both A and B teams dribbled their way through the city and regional Special Olympics games, outplaying every team they met. We were on our way to the state playoffs in Huntsville . . . until we weren't.

* * *

I was losing my mind. It was the championship game, and we were outmatched. The Huntsville B team was much smaller and quicker than our last opponent, and they played defense – a little too forcibly, I felt.

There was a lot of pushing and hip checking and slapping hands, which I tried to point out to the ref when I was asked more than once to get off the court. And my frustration carried over to my team. Our point guard was so flustered, she couldn't make a shot, and my regular rebounders couldn't find the ball if it were handed to them.

I could feel my stress level rising.

My father coached my various basketball teams in leagues on and off military bases since I was five. He was a tough coach, not afraid to let his son ride the bench the entire game, and he was what some would call "passionate." He was thrown out of more than a couple of my games for yelling at the ref, and with a minute left, I could feel myself channeling my old man.

So I called a timeout.

* * *

We had to send our team rosters to the state athletic office before we could travel to Huntsville. And within a few days, we were notified that neither team was eligible to play in the tournament.

It turned out that one of the junior high teams that scrimmaged against our A team put the game on their schedule, which meant that the A team was disqualified from playing in the Special Olympics. They had competed against a "regular" team, even if it was just for practice.

Our B team had three ten-year-olds, and though they outplayed everyone they met that season, we were told: "A ten-year-old could not possibly understand basketball enough to play on a team." They were not allowed to play at the state level.

The odds were against our kids from the beginning and would be for the rest of their lives. Yes, it was just a game, but sports was the one thing, not reading, writing, or math, that made our kids feel like they belonged to something special.

We couldn't do anything about the A team, but we raised hell about the B team.

I sent five dollars to the Alabama High School Athletic Association for a pamphlet on their codes and found the rule actually stated that any team of fifteen-year-olds and under could play in state competitions. There was no rule about being older than a certain age.

So, I wrote the State Superintendent of Education with that information, pleading our case, and right before the tournament, we received word that the B team would be allowed to play.

* * *

The crowd was rooting for us. Most of the students and coaches from other teams in the stands had either seen our semifinals game or heard about it and wanted to see the scrappy underdogs take home the gold.

During the time out, I told my kids to just calm down and have fun. I told our point guard to bring up the ball and if no one was open, take the shot. Then I told the rest of the team to foul the other players once she made the shot.

We stuck our hands in the middle of the huddle and shouted, “Break!” just as the buzzer sounded to tell them to get back on the court.

Our point guard brought up the ball and didn’t even look for someone to pass it to; she just pulled up and sank a three-pointer like it was a layup.

The crowd went nuts.

Our team went into a full-court press and fouled the other team almost immediately. Everyone went down to the other end, where the other team made both free throws.

With less than thirty seconds left, we were down 19 to 15.

Our point guard got the inbound pass and dribbled to half-court as fast as she could. Then she called her own play again and sank another three to make it 19 to 18 with ten seconds left.

We fouled on the inbound pass again on purpose, taking little time off the clock, and the other team missed both free throws. There was still a chance.

Huntsville B knew our next play and triple-teamed our point guard, so we couldn’t get her the ball.

With three seconds left, our center threw the ball half the length of the court. It was tipped by the other team, but our forward caught it and tossed it toward our basket just as the buzzer sounded.

He missed by a mile.

* * *

The Special Olympics Motto, recited before every event is: “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.” I couldn’t have been more proud of my kids. Sure, they were a little disappointed, but they also knew that a silver medal at state was a great achievement.

Our point guard was voted most valuable player for our division by all the coaches and state representatives. Ten years later, she would be a star player on her community college basketball team, getting the opportunity through sports to continue her education.

* * *

Every morning for an entire school year, I went to my job in sweats and a T-shirt. I spent the day playing games with kids. I coached them on basic ball-handling skills, how to swim, and how to run like the wind.

It was the craziest, most hectic, most fun year, and it was the only job I’ve had that I never worked a moment while I was there.

Student Driver

I wasn't panicking.

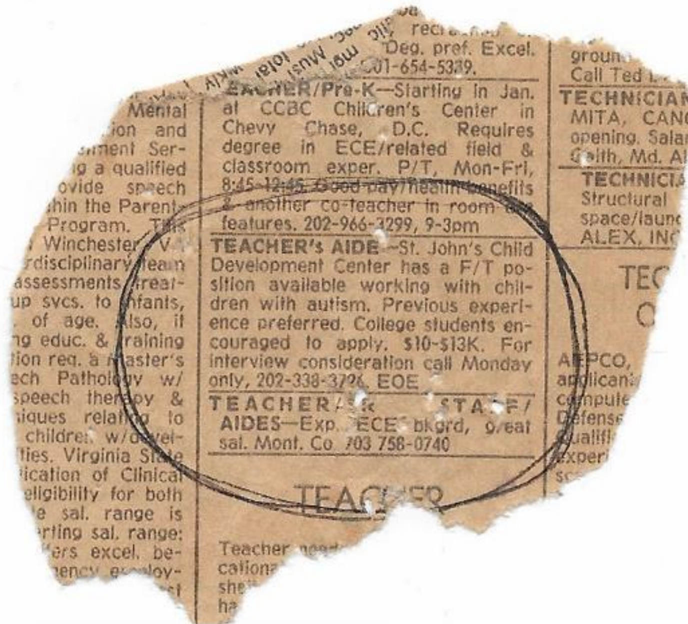
Sure, I'd lost sight of the other school van, and yes, we were a little late, and I couldn't find a parking spot. But I'd been in that position before. I'd been shuttling a vanload of excited autistic children around Washington, D.C. for the past year; I was used to the nerve-wracking traffic and the even more stress-inducing students. But we had been invited to the White House to look at the Christmas decorations, and we were late, and there was no place to park, and all I could think about was a hundred Secret Service men chasing my handful of students through the halls of the most famous house in America in the hopes of keeping them from doing more damage to the place than the British did almost two hundred years ago.

Maybe I was panicking a little.

* * *

It was December 1992. Exactly one year earlier, I dropped out of the child development graduate program at the University of Maryland. It took me less than a semester to realize I was in the wrong place, and though I stuck with my classes through finals, I knew I wouldn't be returning in the spring. I just didn't think I wanted to work with children anymore.

But I wasn't really trained to do anything else, so when I scoured the classifieds for jobs, I stopped at a small ad for a teacher's aide in *The Washington Post*:



Deg. pref. Excel. 301-654-5339.

TEACHER/Pre-K—Starting in Jan. at CCBC Children's Center in Chevy Chase, D.C. Requires degree in ECE/related field & classroom exper. P/T, Mon-Fri, 8:45-12:45. Good pay/health benefits & another co-teacher in room features. 202-966-3299, 9-3pm

TEACHER's AIDE—St. John's Child Development Center has a F/T position available working with children with autism. Previous experience preferred. College students encouraged to apply. $10-$13K. For interview consideration call Monday only, 202-338-3796. EOE

AIDES—Exp. ECE bkgrd, great sal. Mont. Co 703 758-0740

TEACHER

Illustration 1: Want Ad.

I checked all the boxes. Previous experience? I had nearly three years working with developmentally delayed children, including one year as an occupational therapist for an autistic child. College students encouraged to apply? Though I would no longer be enrolled in the child development program, they didn't need to know that.

It was as if the ad was saying: "You're not done working with kids just yet, David."

So, I called the school on Monday, got an interview for the next day, and was hired by the end of the week on a three-month trial basis. My title was Program Assistant, and my worth was set at $11,466 a year.

* * *

St. John's Community Services was founded as an orphanage in 1868 to care for children abandoned during the Civil War. In 1956, St. John's Board of Trustees closed the orphanage and began addressing the care and education of autistic and mentally retarded children. In 1989, St. John's Community Services purchased the former Georgetown Day School to educate children in

D.C. who needed that extra bit of help, and thus St. John's Child Development Center was born.

The school was located on the far west corner of D.C. (third base, if you looked at the city as a baseball diamond). It was a stone's throw from the Potomac River and a two-minute drive to the Maryland border. It was four miles from the White House, near Georgetown University, and in one of the city's oldest and most exclusive neighborhoods.

On my first day, the director gave me a quick tour. The small school had two yellow-brick buildings. The office was on the first floor of the main building, just to the right of the front door. Straight ahead was a hallway that led to classrooms for older children and additional offices. To the left of the front door, across from the office, were the stairs that led up to the cafeteria on the second floor and the rest of the classrooms. The cafeteria overlooked the parking lot, and classrooms were separated by a large hallway.

The main building was built into the side of a hill covered with trees, so all of the classrooms on the second floor were level with the top of the hill. You entered each classroom from the hallway door, and there was a backdoor that led out to the blacktop play area that had a two-story wood fort that stretched into the trees, as well as some metal playground equipment – monkey bars, a silver slide, and the largest swing set I'd ever seen outside a fairground.

Across the blacktop was a smaller structure covered in the same yellow bricks. This building housed the gym, where the kids could play organized gross motor games and have indoor recess when it rained. The school psychologist and adaptive P.E. teacher had their offices in this building.

There was a large fence behind the playground that kept the kids from escaping, and the entire complex was surrounded by trees so thick, even in the winter, I had no clue that I was in a tony neighborhood, let alone the Nation's Capital.

After the tour, the director dropped me off at my new class. I was with the youngest kids, the ones who would have been in kindergarten or first grade if not for a tweak in their genes or an accident after birth. Four students waited to greet me: twin girls who never stopped smiling or talking; a round, nonverbal boy who was developing normally until he ate lead paint chips off a window sill just as he was learning to walk; and a skinny autistic boy who couldn't sit still and couldn't tell us why.

The teacher was a young woman with a soft voice and kind smile. She had long black hair that was starting to turn gray, even though she was just a couple of years older than me. She had been at the school since it opened a few years earlier.

My duties were simple: Assist the teacher.

Each morning, we collected our students from the buses and took them to the cafeteria for breakfast, followed by the first bathroom break of the day and then on to class. Classwork was worksheets or games that strengthened their fine motor skills, and the students were rewarded with a special toy or five minutes of listening to music with headphones if they did well. After that came another bathroom break then recess – my favorite time of the day.

The kids and I couldn't wait to escape the classroom and run around with wild abandon. We would climb on the playground equipment like ants and play with students from other classes. Not all of the students were eager to be in this oftentimes overstimulating situation, but I was able to use my previous work experience as an adaptive P.E. coach to coax the least athletically and socially inclined students to stretch their legs and their minds, even for just a few minutes before they lost interest or asked to go back inside.

After recess, it was back to the rooms for more classwork, then it was another bathroom break before heading to lunch in the cafeteria. The teachers and aides took turns eating with the

students to help those who needed to stay on task.

After lunch was “rest time.” The kids would lay out their mats, and the teacher would press play on the same Panasonic tape recorder I had in junior high. The soulful, smoky stylings of Phoebe Snow would fill the classroom, and though only one student would fall asleep, everyone else stayed relatively quiet.

After “rest time,” we worked on more fine motor skills games and worksheets, went outside for afternoon recess, then loaded the students in buses or their parents’ cars and sent them home.

Our days were structured and exhausting for both students and teachers, but there was one duty I always looked forward to: field trip driver.

* * *

I had circled the White House twice, and the kids were getting restless.

D.C. is a daunting city to drive in. The city was laid out by Pierre Charles L’Enfant in 1791, who used a typical grid system you would usually see in big cities like New York or Chicago, but L’Enfant added long diagonal streets that cut through the city, the effect of which created lots of roundabouts, circles, and small parks. I was often told that L’Enfant designed the city to confuse invaders, but it didn’t seem to bother the British, and it certainly didn’t bother me.

I grew up learning to drive on the roads in and outside the city. I loved winding through the narrow streets and jumping in and out of traffic circles, and since most teachers did not like driving in the city, they looked to me to take the wheel.

The school had two white vans, each with three rows of seats that could carry eight students (ten if they were small) and two teachers. We would use the vans to shuttle the kids all over the city. We took them to play at local parks, we attended puppet shows and rode the carousel at Glen Echo Park, we went on trips to the local library and the Mall, and we visited students at our big

brother and sister school, Sidwell Friends.

The most stress-free part of field trips for me were the moments I was behind the wheel in traffic. But while driving in the city didn't faze me, trying to find a place to park did tend to raise my blood pressure.

Once, we were on our way to meet fifty students from a local school for a tour of the National Gallery of Art. We got to the museum with time to spare, but I couldn't find a parking space. It would have been nice if our vans had handicap stickers, but they didn't, so after I dropped the kids off in front of the museum, I drove around for the next thirty minutes looking for a space. Finally, I gave up and parked semi-illegally next to a school bus in the loading zone behind the museum (it was a miracle the van wasn't towed).

When I caught up with my class, one of my students was disrupting the tour because he wanted to go out and play. So, I took him outside and made him sit on a Mall bench for the next forty minutes, which he loved, but I was annoyed because I really wanted to see the art.

Finally, the kids came out of the museum. Our teacher looked haggard, and I found out our little angels had set off two alarms, and one even touched a seventeenth-century painting.

This was another thing I was worried about when I couldn't find a parking spot near the White House. I didn't want to drop off the kids with only one teacher in charge, especially since I didn't know where the other vanload of students and teachers was.

And I really wanted to see the decorations.

* * *

I turned down Constitution Ave, and just as we passed between the Washington Monument and the Ellipse, where the National Christmas Tree stood, the teacher saw the other school van in front of us, so I sped through traffic to catch up with them.

We took a right on 17th Street and headed back toward the White House. We turned back onto Pennsylvania Avenue, and I was about to give up and head back to the school when the lead van pulled up to the gate in front of West Executive Ave. The road was right next to the White House and had been closed down and converted into a parking lot in the 1950s for security reasons.

I idled behind the van, wondering what was going on, when the guard waved us through, and we were able to find parking spots right next to the building.

My relief was palpable. The tension was gone from my neck and shoulders, and I suddenly realized my fingers were aching because I had been clenching the wheel so hard for the last half hour.

But with one problem solved came another. My concentration shifted to the kids, and all I could do was focus on making sure we got them into the building and out again without causing a national incident. I was so focused I barely noticed my wife, Robin, and her best friend had joined us for the tour. I was so focused I didn't take the time to appreciate the decorations or wave to President Bush when we were hurried out of the foyer so he could get in the presidential limousine to be whisked away to some important meeting.

It wasn't until we got the kids buckled safely back in the van that I started to relax. I was back in my element, back behind the wheel.

The drive back to school was a breeze.

Poetry Man

You make me laugh
'Cause your eyes they light the night
They look right through me
– Phoebe Snow, "Poetry Man"

I'm not ashamed to admit that my favorite part of the school day at St. John's Child Development Center was "rest time." Sure, recess was fun, but it was still work, making sure kids didn't hurt themselves or one another on the playground. But "rest time" was that twenty-minute pause right after lunch that allowed everyone to catch their breaths before returning to the madness.

To calm our Wild Things, the teacher played the same cassette tape of Phoebe Snow's melodic voice every day. However, the cassette wasn't one of Ms. Snow's albums. The teacher had recorded and rerecorded only one of her songs, "Poetry Man," until it filled the entire side A of the tape. We would listen to the song on repeat for twenty minutes. When the tape clicked off in mid-warble, the kids knew it was time to get up.

I must have listened to that song a thousand times, at least five times every school day for almost a year and a half, and I never got tired of it. The mellow, almost mystical musical notes were a good choice to soothe the children; however, I still thought it was odd. The teacher's boyfriend was an MFA student studying poetry at some school in Philadelphia (theirs was a short-distance relationship), and I guessed that song reminded her of him. However, after the fourth week, I started to realize what the lyrics meant. I'm not sure the teacher knew that Ms. Snow was singing about an affair with a married man . . . maybe she did.

* * *

I only worked thirty hours a week, and I never carried the job with me past the school's

parking lot, which was perfect. I was out the door early and back home in plenty of time to write.

Though I only lived fourteen miles from the school, our apartment was on the opposite side of the city in New Carrollton, Maryland (right field if you are still on the baseball diamond), and my commute took me through the heart of D.C. In the morning, I could count on my drive lasting anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, but leaving school at three allowed me to avoid rush hour and zip through D.C. I was usually back at the apartment in under thirty minutes.

Once I got home, I decompressed with a snack and an episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*, and then I booted up my IBM Personal System/2. It was my first computer, not counting the Commodore VIC-20 I got in high school, and I used it to write stories.

The PS/2 didn't have preinstalled software or memory, so before I turned it on, I had to insert two 3.5" DOS boot disks into the computer's side-by-side disk drives, which were built into the machine right below the monitor. Then, when the command prompt (C:\) appeared, I had to load four WordPerfect disks, two at a time, in the correct order, until a blue screen appeared with a blinking cursor. At this point, I could start writing, or I could insert a fifth disk that contained my saved work. It could take fifteen minutes before I could type my first line, which is why I started booting up the machine right when I got home.

I had wanted to be a writer since my freshman year of college, but I never said a word about it to anyone. When I met Robin, I knew I was in love because she was the first person I told about my secret longing. And I knew she loved me back when she bought me my first copy of *Writer's Market*.

No one I knew wanted to be a writer; back then, no one talked about being a writer – certainly, no one talked about being a children's writer. But that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to write middle-grade adventure stories and mysteries that were obviously updated versions of my

favorite Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys' escapades.

My heroes were Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Roald Dahl, Dianne Wynne Jones, and Lynne Reid Banks, and when I wasn't reading their books, I was filling floppy disks with novels and short stories I peddled to publications such as *Boy's Life* and *The Friend* and all the insects and animals: *Cricket*, *Lady Bug*, *Turtle*, *Ranger Rick*, even *Cat Fancy*. I submitted my work to *Hopscotch*, *U.S. Kids*, and *The New Yorker* of Kid Lit: *Highlights*.

I even tried my hand at poetry. I wrote funny poems about bugs and trees and cats and maudlin poems about death and lost love. I wrote terrible poems about writing poems, and a few were actually accepted. Right before I started at St. John's, *New Writer's Magazine* gave me my first acceptance for my eight-line masterpiece, "Writer's Cramp." I didn't make a dime, and I can't remember seeing the publication, but I was on top of the world.

And being on top of the world inspired my favorite poem from those days.

* * *

M.— was a handful.

M.— was a skinny kid with a big head and wide eyes that always seemed to be searching for something. And he never stopped moving. He was a combination of my most hyperactive and autistic students; he was an exhausting delight.

He couldn't communicate verbally and only knew a handful of signs, but he rarely used them. He did, however, understand everything you said to him. It's just that most of the time, he chose not to listen.

Usually, M.— was a happy child who had a smile for everyone. But he could get frustrated fast, and his tantrums were epic. Once, when the nurse and I were taking him to her office after he scraped his knee on the playground, he got scared and started jumping up and down like a

kangaroo. We tried to calm him, but he wouldn't listen. Instead, he made one angry jump straight into the air, and as he returned to earth, he sunk his teeth into my shoulder.

I screamed, more from shock than pain, and M.— froze.

The nurse checked my shoulder. There was a bruise that any dentist could use to make a mold of M.—'s mouth, but the skin wasn't broken.

"You need to get a Hep C test, just in case," she said.

I never did.

A good day with M.— was getting him to slow down for a moment to finish a coloring sheet. A great day was when you could catch his attention for just a second, and he would look at you with those big brown eyes and really see you – like he was looking into your soul – and he would smile a smile that seemed to say: *relax, everything will be fine*.

Then he would break eye contact just as fast and start bouncing like Tigger or focus on his fingers as they flapped like hummingbird wings in front of his eyes.

M.—'s favorite pastime was swinging, and like any good educator, I used that to my advantage.

If M.— finished a worksheet, I'd take him outside to swing for five minutes. If M.— made it through lunch without throwing food, that was another five minutes on the swings. If M.— played nicely with the other students, I'd give him an extra two minutes on the swings after recess.

One day, after recess, I was outside watching M.— swing. The rest of the students and teachers had returned to class, and I was just standing there on the blacktop while M.— climbed higher and higher into the air.

Watching M.— swing always made me a little nervous. We had one of those swing sets from the 1970s that schools and parks stopped installing because they looked like death traps. Two

metal A-frames held aloft a metal bar. From the bar hung six sets of metal chains that looked more at home in a biker fight, and each set of chains held a black, plastic strip seat two feet off the ground.

Normally, M.— wouldn't swing too high. He would use the crooks of his arms to hold on to the chains so his fingers were free to flash in front of his eyes as he swung back and forth. But what scared me most was when he grabbed on tight with both hands and began kicking his legs out with such force that he was twenty feet in the air in no time, flying back and forth over my head like a circus trapeze artist.

Without anyone else on the playground to worry about, I was able to focus on M.— as he swung that afternoon. I noticed that while he was pumping his legs, climbing higher and higher, he had his eyes closed. Then, just as he reached the height where the chains were parallel to the ground, he'd open his eyes to the sky. In that split second, when the swing paused at the top of its arc before making its downward trip, it was as if M.— was a feather, floating effortlessly above the world. His eyes were wide, his face in full smile. He was free.

On the return trip, the chain would start to sag, and an instant later, the seat, with him in it, would follow. The chain would tighten as he fell back to Earth, dragging him down so that his feet could almost touch the ground, then whip him backward and up again, where he would almost disappear into the treetops before repeating the moment of weightlessness.

It was a scary and mesmerizing sight. There was such joy in that swinging, and I was sure if M.— had had his way, he never would have stopped.

And then it came to me, a poem almost fully formed.

I wrote it down when I got home later that day. It was one of the easiest things I had ever written.

When I thought it was ready, I excitedly sent it out to *Cricket* magazine . . . and I received the rejection letter six weeks later.

Undaunted (it was hardly my first "Dear writer . . ." letter), I shoved it in an envelope to *The Friend*, along with a cover letter and an SASE envelope (58¢ in total), and almost two months later to the day, I received an envelope with an acceptance letter and a check for $25. They wanted to use my poem as a poster they could send to classrooms.

I think I felt a little of what M.— felt on those swings when I opened that envelope. I was on top of the world.

From then on, every day during rest time, as Ms. Snow sang about her adulterous affair, I'd smile and think: Why in the world would you go to school to learn how to be a poet?

Swings

Getting ready for take off

three, two, one.....

I launch myself into the air

headed for the sun

Entering the sky

I'm as happy as can be

here on my swing

I am totally free

Backwards and front

my swing carries me

frontwards and back

the whole world I see

Flying through the air

the wind in my face

A little bit higher

and I can touch outer space

I soar like a glider

through the air I sail

or even a kite

with a long flowing tail

Maybe I'm an eagle

my wings spread wide

flying through the sky

the clouds at my side

I feel like a pilot

with my own jet plane

or maybe I'm an astronaut

the feelings are still the same

The time draws near

and I must end my trip

I steady my legs

and loosen my grip

When my feet hit the Earth, I turn back around

I look to those swings

that had once been my wings,

and I am glad of the adventures I found.

PART 4 – TEMP SLAVE

Zen and the Art of Temping

Moving Mountains

Time Off For Good Behavior

Zen and the Art of Temping

I bent down and picked up a rock that caught my eye. In a field covered with stones of all shapes and sizes, this one had a bright blue line running through it. I wondered if it was a natural streak or had been added by some kid with a marker.

I frowned. I knew very little about rocks – I didn't know a geode from a gneiss – and I couldn't determine why this rock was different than all the rest, so I tossed it into the growing pile in my wheelbarrow. I surveyed the landscape and tried to count how many wheelbarrows I had left. I sighed and got back to work.

My wife once got to temp at NASA, and I was in the middle of Montana behind a newly built house, picking up rocks so the developer could lay down sod. It was my first temp job, and with it, I'd learned my first lesson: Not all temp jobs are equal – well, that and don't leave your work gloves on the kitchen table.

* * *

Robin and I graduated college just as the economy was tanking.

It was the summer of 1991, and the U.S. was in the middle of a year-long recession. We got married a few weeks after Robin got her degree, and we drove straight from Alabama to D.C. I had been accepted into the child development graduate program at the University of Maryland, and Robin was hoping to put her social work degree to good use in the Nation's Capital.

Unfortunately, even the organizations tasked with helping the unemployed and down-and-out were not hiring. So, to help pay the rent, Robin turned to the one thing many of our jobless friends were being forced to do for a few bucks after graduation: She signed up with a temp agency.

Temp agencies had been around since the early 1970s as companies took on temporary

employees to replace sick workers or those who wanted to go on vacation. The 1990 recession saw an explosion of temporary employment. In 1983, there were less than a million temporary employees in the workforce, but by 1991, there were 1.5 million temps, and by 1995, that number jumped to 2.5 million.[15]

Temporary work is different from seasonal work. Seasonal work comes and goes with, well, the seasons. Seasonal workers can include summer camp counselors, tax accountants, farm hands, and mall Santas and their little helpers. Technically, even teachers could be considered seasonal workers.

But temps? Temps come and go at the whim of a company that needs a warm body, usually to perform the tasks no one else wants to. Need to arrange ten thousand computer cards in numeric order? Hire a temp. Need someone to answer your phone for the afternoon? A temp can do that. Need someone to locate your septic tank and you are too cheap to hire a professional? A temp will dig up your yard for a tenth of the pay. Temp jobs happen all year long, and they can last from a few hours to a couple of weeks.

Not everyone is cut out for temping; it can be lonely work. More often than not, you are put into a cubicle to input sheets of numbers into the computer or stationed in a file room that needs reordering or shuffled into a storage room that needs to be cleaned. Sometimes you are there just to answer the phones.

Most full-timers won't bother trying to remember your name. No matter how long you are there, you will always be referred to as "the temp." It's dehumanizing – and yet, freeing. People don't care about you, other than what you can do for them, and you don't have to listen to them blather on about the minutia of their lives; unless, of course, that's what you've been hired to do.

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[15] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temporary_work

Robin was hired to do many things when she signed up with Manpower. She worked for the City of Bladensburg in a councilman's office, answering phones and typing letters. She worked in a church office, answering phones and building their weekly newsletter, and she spent two weeks doing data entry at a NASA facility. She had special clearance and everything.

One of the last temp jobs she had, was at a company that was going out of business. All she had to do was answer the phones. The job lasted almost two months, but since the company was shuttering, she mostly cross-stitched and did crossword puzzles while the regular employees took three-hour lunches and stripped the copper wire out of the building's walls to sell for scrap.

And then she got an offer of a full-time job . . . in Montana.

Excited at the prospect of degree-related employment, we packed up the cat, the futon, and a few boxes of books and headed west. We arrived in Missoula in the summer of 1993, and it was my turn to be unemployed, so I headed to the local temp agency.

* * *

As much as we complained about the Snellings and Manpowers of our time, hooking up with one of these places when you are new to a town is a great way to get to know the lay of the land. Unfortunately, the temp agency I signed up with took that way too literally.

My agent asked me if I wanted indoor or outdoor work. I thought outdoor would be more fun, seeing as how I'd never lived in such a beautiful place – and the extra eight bucks an hour outdoor work paid sounded nice. The next day I was called for my first assignment.

"The client is building a house and needs some help," my agent informed me.

"Sure," I said. I didn't know the first thing about construction work, but I wasn't afraid to broaden my mind or bruise my muscles.

The job was twenty miles outside of town. When I got to the address I had been given, I

thought there was some mistake. I didn't see any construction going on. It looked to me like the house was completely built. Maybe the inside needed work, I thought as I hopped out of the car.

A tall, skinny guy with mussed hair was standing next to a VW bus in the driveway.

"Hey," he said, and I lobbed it back. We didn't introduce ourselves, but I understood from the way his shoulders slumped and his lack of eye contact that he was another temp sent by the agency.

We were just about to approach the door when we heard a honk. We turned, and a bear of a man dislodged himself from the cab of a white pick-up. He looked like Grizzly Adams.

"You the temps?" he asked.

We nodded.

"Come around back," he said.

We followed Grizzly as he led us around the side of the house to a dirt field that I presumed had recently suffered from an attack of locusts.

"I need you guys to remove all of the rocks from this backyard so we can lay down the sod."

I looked out across the landscape. There were tons of rocks. Thousands of stones – from the boulders left by glaciers to the golf ball-sized pebbles – also left by the glaciers.

I laughed.

Grizzly looked at me like I was trying to steal the fish off his plate. Then he handed me a shovel and showed my partner where the wheelbarrow was. "Move all the rocks over there," he said, pointing to a pile of rocks that must have been gathered from the other backyards in the neighborhood. "I'll be back at five to sign your timesheets." Apparently, this man had dealt with temps before. I wondered how many of them were buried under that pile of rocks.

After Grizzly left, my partner bent down and picked up a fist-sized rock. He shook his head, tossed it back down, and then looked at me over his John Lennon sunglasses. "I'm outta here," he said, and I watched as he disappeared around the front of the house and drove away in his Minibus.

I briefly considered following my new friend to rock-less pastures, but I was raised on a healthy dose of duty mixed with guilt, and I really didn't have anything else to do that day, and I needed the cash. So, after ten minutes of staring at the backyard, running through all the scenarios, I figured maybe I could make some sort of Zen thing out of it, like those guys and their rock gardens, only I'd be getting rid of the rocks, or maybe I could make a game of it and see how many rocks I could pick up in an hour then try and beat that record.

I thought, "Why not?" and I got to work.

It was rough going. I had forgotten my work gloves at home, and my hands were made for teaching children about the types of rocks and not removing them from a field. My body was aching by the time I filled the first wheelbarrow. By the fifth full wheelbarrow, I'd pushed past the pain in my hands and knees, but all I could think about was there had to be a machine out there that does this kind of work. Ten rock-filled wheelbarrows in, and my mind shut down.

And so I learned my second temp lesson: Detach to survive.

That lesson came in handy when I went on my next several temp jobs. Disengaging allowed me to alphabetize thousands of green index customer cards for a restaurant supply store, ignoring all the paper cuts. Disconnecting my mind from digging up the side of a mountain in search of a busted septic tank allowed me to survive one of Montana's coldest summers on record. And when I signed on to scrape black paint off the silver legs of a hundred elementary school desks with just Windex and a box cutter, I didn't once think of shiving my supervisor at the temp agency.

Back at the rock quarry, there was purpose in my movement and blankness in my mind. I had successfully blocked out all external noises. I ignored the beauty around me. I was singularly focused on the movement from rock to wheelbarrow to rock pile. At one point, I was sure I was close to obtaining Nirvana, but then I tripped over a stone and lost it in a flurry of cuss words.

By the time Grizzly returned at three, I had removed two-thirds of the rocks from the field. My hands were shredded, and my body ached, but my mind was clear.

"Where's your friend?" Grizzly asked.

"Left," I said.

Grizzly gave the field a once over and then grabbed my shovel. We worked for four more hours before the field was clear of the most minuscule of stones.

Grizzly signed my time card for the hours I worked alone and with him, then he gave me an extra twenty out of his pocket for the overtime he knew I wasn't going to get from the agency. I thanked him and headed back home, tired, bruised, and exhausted . . . but in that Zen sort of way.

Moving Mountains

"You ready?"

It's 1993, and I'm standing on the side of a mountain above Missoula, Montana, with a shovel in one hand and the other buried in my armpit for warmth. It's seven o'clock in the morning, and I'm staring down at where the city should be, but it and the surrounding mountains have disappeared behind gauze-like clouds. The temperature dropped forty degrees overnight, and a light rain mixed with sleet peppers my cheeks like BBs. Whoever said the coldest winter they experienced was the summer they spent in San Francisco never visited Montana in July.

"Nope," I say, following my new friend to the ditch we've been digging for the last two days. We're searching for a septic system junction box where the shit from the hillside mansion's many bathrooms meets before making its way to the septic tank.

"I think we should dig this way," he says when we reach yesterday's stopping point. He's pointing to the left, toward the two-story shed near the edge of the property.

I nod and put on my work gloves. Plunging my shovel into the cold, wet earth, I wonder whose bright idea it was to move to Montana.

* * *

I was born in the Army hospital at Fort Lewis in Washington State. Two weeks later, my mother and I moved to Sacramento, California, to live with her parents while my father went to Vietnam. He returned when I was old enough to resent this strange man in my mother's bed, and for the next twelve years, we moved every other summer. I had no control. I was just one more thing my father carried with him as he traveled from post to post, job to job.

And I loved it.

I loved the idea of new places and new faces. I loved the freedom that comes with just picking up and leaving. I was a small, quiet kid, but I learned to make friends fast, knowing I would lose them as easily as baby teeth. And it was no problem making friends because we were all in the same boots. We were all just marking time until the next destination, so why waste it making enemies?

And then we arrived in Northern Virginia, and my father finagled several posts, including a solo return to Korea, which allowed his children to stay in place long enough for me to spend all four years in the same high school. After graduation, I went to college as far away from everyone as possible.

* * *

We find the junction box on the third day. It is ten yards south of where the owner thought it was, and when we uncover it, you'd think we struck oil.

The box is smaller than I imagine, a little less than two feet long and a foot tall. It's white with pipes leading in and out of it. My co-digger pops off the top, and fortunately, the air is so cold, we can't smell anything. Unfortunately, we quickly discover the box is not the problem.

"Something must be wrong with the tanks," the owner says when he joins us at the hole. "Nothing more we can do today." He says "we" like we're brothers-in-arms – as if he has been out here for the last three days, knee-deep in the mud and rocks with us.

* * *

During my senior year in college, I fell in love with a girl who had spent her first eighteen years in a tiny town in the Alabama hills; the furthest Robin had lived from home was two hours away when she moved to Tuscaloosa for school. But she latched onto my itinerate spirit, and after we married in her hometown Baptist church, we headed north to Maryland.

It was another move with a purpose: I had been accepted into the child development graduate program at the University of Maryland, and Robin was excited to put her newly acquired social work degree to good use in D.C.

After the first semester, I left the program, unsure of what I wanted to do with my life, and Robin couldn't find a job. It was 1991, and the country was suffering through what was quaintly referred to as a "jobless recovery," which impacted our ability to find steady, stable income. We tried and failed for two years before trying our luck somewhere else. We chose Montana, a place I had never been, a place neither of us had ties to. It was my first move without a real purpose, and I was just as thrilled as when I was a kid.

There were a few other reasons we moved West: one was so I could focus on writing. We picked Missoula because it had five bookstores, a world-famous children's theatre, and a major university known for its literary community. But when we arrived, I found I couldn't sit still. I needed a purpose. So, I searched the phone book for the local temp office.

The assignment was vague: "An old man needs a little help in his backyard." The old man's backyard turned out to be on the side of a mountain overlooking the town. It was huge and immaculate.

And the old man was actually a middle-aged, "well-connected" man who owned a casino in Reno and spent his summers in Montana. He had recently suffered a heart attack and was a cheap son of a bitch, which is why he hired two skinny-ass temps instead of a septic tank crew to dig up his backyard in hopes of finding a plugged pipe. I wondered if he used a doctor or a temp to unblock his heart.

* * *

It takes us a week to find the septic tanks. Two days later, a real construction crew removes

the tanks, replacing them with crap-free containers. As my co-digger and I puzzle back the hundred pieces of sod we had to carefully dig up because Casino Man is too cheap to pay for new grass, I wonder how long it will take him to plug his new, pristine pipes.

* * *

For the next month, I bounced from job to job. I scraped paint off metal school desks. I alphabetized thousands of index cards. I moved a house. All the while without health insurance, barely making enough to pay rent. And then the Missoula school district called. I had applied to be a special education assistant when we first arrived in town, and they were calling to tell me I got the job. I could finally breathe a little easier.

After a couple of years, Robin and I left Missoula, and we made a few more moves before settling in Texas. But Montana is still the only place we set out for on a whim, and I kind of miss the freedom – and fear – that came from a purposeless move.

Time Off For Good Behavior

"David, did you know you've been here almost two years?"

It's 1997, and my manager is standing above my workstation. Sunlight from the window behind us lights up her mass of bottle-blonde hair. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was an angel.

I remove an earbud, momentarily interrupting my book on tape. "Has it been that long?"

She nods. "Do you know what that means?"

"I get a gold watch?" I ask, hopefully. Surely, working the same temp job for two years is equivalent to fifty in FTE (which, of course, stands for full-time enjoyment – I mean *equivalent*, which in no way means I am equivalent to a real employee).

She shows that smirk that tells me she doesn't appreciate my humor – or me – but I don't take it personally. I am, after all, just a temp.

"No," she says tersely, "it means we have to lay you off for three months."

"What?" I ask, hoping it's National Tease the Temp Day.

"Federal regulations state that temporary workers cannot work longer than two years at a job without taking three months off." She smiles. "But don't worry. You can come back in ninety days."

"Ninety days?"

"Think of it as a long vacation."

"I don't want a vacation," I say. "I want to be able to eat."

"You're so funny," she says, which in manager-speak means: *I'm leaving because I don't want to be seen in the company of a temp*, and she walks away from my station.

I'm mad. I know a two-year temp job is an oxymoron. The whole concept of temp work is not permanent work. But the flexibility of the job allows me to work when I want while leaving me time for school and studying. It also allows me to eat more than just ramen noodles every once in a while.

I look at my co-tempers for sympathy, but they've all turned back to their computers, trying to look busy lest they incur the wrath of our manager.

* * *

Two years earlier, I saw a flyer outside the English Department office. A Fortune 50 company known for its printers and computers was looking for part-time employees. The flyer hyped flexible hours and a "competitive salary." Make a little cash while you are going to school, it teased.

I certainly needed the cash.

Robin was pregnant, and while her job paid for our rent and healthcare, my graduate stipend only covered gas and ramen. I had heard diapers were expensive, and we were worried about the additional rent from having to move out of our one-bedroom apartment near the campus.

I called the number on the flyer and almost hung up when the receptionist answered, "Thank you for calling Manpower."

Apparently, the job was not with said Fortune 50 company but was, in fact, with a temp agency. Manpower. The temp agency I swore I would never work for again.

But I needed the money, so I held my nose and made my deal with the devil.

Again.

* * *

I showed up at the office building and waited in the reception area for two more temps to

arrive. Once assembled, we were given temporary access badges and then escorted to our cubicles (my first), tiny alcoves just big enough for a chair and a computer station right outside our manager's office. Our spots were near the breakroom, and my manager, the bottle-blonde who was five years younger than me and would kick me to the curb two years later, showed us around. She pointed out the copy room and the bathrooms and told us we could have anything from the breakroom – within reason.

This was the start of the dot-com era, and the company's corporate office was in Palo Alto, California, so they believed in treating their employees well, even their bastard step-children. The breakroom wasn't just stocked with water, coffee, and a complimentary box of donuts every other Friday. There were refrigerators filled with soft drinks, juice drinks, and both kinds of water: spring and sparkling. The vending machines were stuffed with sweet and savory snacks, and they magically worked at the press of a button – no money needed. We didn't have a gourmet chef on staff, but I was starting to think this assignment would be better than my previous temp positions.

We were hired for a one-time project: copyedit twenty-two thousand one-page online support documents. The work was pretty simple. My job was to pull up a document from the server, update the styles and tracking systems, format tables, read for grammatical errors, run a spell-check, save it, and ship it back to the server to be uploaded to the web. Then I would pull up another document and continue the entire process. I never once saw a sheet of paper.

In the beginning, I wondered how someone with a broken computer could log onto the internet to find instructions that would help them fix their computer. But after a few months, I stopped caring. I was just another production line worker, picking up one document, cleaning it, putting it down, picking up the next document, cleaning it, putting it down, and on and on. It was monotonous work broken up by mix tapes, free Zingers, and orange juice, and all I had to show

for my effort was a bunch of ones and zeros floating around in the air.

* * *

It took us almost eight months to get through the project. During that time, I saw my first two cohorts leave for bigger and better things (they called them full-time jobs, I think). They were replaced with two others, and then they left and were replaced with two others – and so on and so on.

We also moved from the indistinct office building in an indistinct office park to a newly converted warehouse to the main corporate campus. I went from a tiny cubicle (cubiclette?) to a wide-opened room, to a large cubicle, which we called the bullpen, that had four computer stations, one in each corner. My manager claimed that the open space allowed for a more free flow of information – better synergy, or some such bullshit – but it just gave us more opportunities to goof off.

When we moved to the warehouse, we lost our free drinks and snacks, and when we moved to the bullpen, we picked up a fourth temp – a fellow graduate student I conned into signing up so I could have someone to talk to.

* * *

Despite bordering on death from boredom, I am good at what I do.

After we finished the initial project, we were told to edit other company missives. New, poorly written memos and project plans came in daily, so I wasn't afraid of losing my job. We worked on company documents with security levels ranging from "Anyone with a third-grade reading ability is allowed to see this" to "If this leaks out, the Feds will be all over us." I once had a document so confidential I had to edit it with my eyes closed. I figured I knew so much about this company that they couldn't fire me. I had the ultimate job security – blackmail. They'd have

to kill me before they could fire me.

Wait a minute. . . .

But now I have to take this little "vacation."

I guess it really isn't that bad. After music failed to keep me awake, I switched to the spoken word. I have listened to almost every book on tape our local library has, including everything Hillerman, Isaac Asimov, and Lillian Jackson Braun have written (I love those mystery-solving cats), as well as all the classics, like the ten-cassette set of *War and Peace*. You probably think I have superpowers, being able to read and listen to books simultaneously, and you'd be right. I'm a temp – I can do anything. After the first five documents, I got the hang of copyediting, and I was practically doing them in my sleep. I only listen to the books because they keep me awake.

There has been one other problem that doesn't make a vacation sound so bad. Even though we have copyedited the original twenty-two thousand documents, the higher-ups have decided to change some of their standards, like "It should be 'printer series' instead of 'series printer,' so we are starting to see documents we have already worked on. I'm beginning to feel like that Sisyphus guy: Open document, make a change. Close document. Open same document, make the change back. Close document. Open same document, yet again, and make the change back. And so on and so on.

I guess it could be worse than being sent on a three-month vacation. At least I'll get to spend more time with my wife and the kid.

I wonder if you can feed a one-year-old ramen.

PART 5 – DETOUR

Jobs Not Taken (A Choose Your Own Career Story)

Blindly Submitting

Jobs Not Taken (A Choose Your Own Career Story)

It's 1995, and you have spent the last year researching graduate programs in English and school psychology. You've skimmed a hundred novels listed in your English GRE practice books and taken several practice psychology GRE tests.

You eventually sit through both tests, do miserably on them, and narrow your school choices to those that don't require a GRE score. From that list, you send out applications to three schools:

1. Simmons University in Boston for a masters in Children's Literature
2. An English program in a nearby state for a masters in English Literature
3. The University of Montana for a masters in school psychology

You get accepted to all three programs.

If you pick the Children's Literature program, turn to page 113.

If you pick the English program, turn to page 114.

If you pick the school psychology program, turn to page 115.

Your wife is not happy.

She wasn't excited about staying in the West, but Boston is too far away from family and friends.

And how will you pay for everything? The acceptance letter didn't offer any type of stipend or teaching job.

And she was never thrilled with you attending an all-girls college, even if their graduate school was now accepting men.

But hey, why not go for it? Maybe you won't drive the four days in silence, save for the constant wailing of a carsick cat who hates road trips, wondering if your marriage will survive the move. Maybe you won't end up destitute and alone, selling papers to undergrads to make ends meet. Maybe everything will work out and you become the preeminent scholar in children's literature and they name a book award after you.

The End

It's moving day, and you and your wife are packing a small U-Haul truck. You've been accepted to a graduate school in English Lit, and once you Tetris all of your belongings into the back of the truck and find the cat, you'll say goodbye to Missoula, probably forever, and head west.

Suddenly, you hear the phone ring. You frown. You thought you already packed it.

You make your way through the maze of moving boxes on the living room floor and find the phone still plugged into the wall. You pick up the receiver.

"Hi, I'm trying to reach Mr. LaBounty."

"Speaking."

"Hi, I'm – calling from Simmons University."

It takes a split second for your mind to catch up. Simmons. Boston. Dream graduate program.

"We're wondering if you've made a decision about our acceptance to our Children's Literature program."

You explain that you accepted an offer from another graduate school, and the person on the other end of the phone asks you why. You tell them that the other school offered a graduate assistantship, which comes with full tuition.

"Oh, I wish we would have contacted you earlier," the person on the other end of the line says. "We have teaching positions available for our graduate students with full tuition included."

Your stomach drops.

She asks, "Would you reconsider joining our program?"

If you finish packing the U-Haul and drive West, turn to page 117.

If you finish packing the U-Haul and drive East, turn to page 116.

You were never going to pick the school psychology program.

You applied because you didn't think you would be accepted into one of the literature programs, but you weren't excited about having to take out another college loan for a career you didn't want anymore.

Pick again.

If you pick the Children's Literature program, turn to page 113.

If you pick the English program, turn to page 114.

~~*If you pick the school psychology program, turn to page 115.*~~

Your wife is pissed.

There’s no way she will sit in a moving van for four days with all your belongings and a carsick cat.

And where do you think we’re going to live when we get there? she asks.

Besides, she thought the whole thing was settled months ago.

No, we’re heading West, and that’s the end of the discussion.

Turn to the next page (as if you really had a choice in the matter).

You laugh about the phone call with your wife as you drive over Lolo Pass.

She received a similar call two years earlier when you were living in Maryland. She had spent the two years before you moved to Montana desperately trying to get a job in social work. She came close on several occasions. She interviewed at a handful of nursing homes, had a couple of interviews at the Red Cross (her dream job) to be the assistant to Elizabeth Dole's traveling secretary, and interviewed with Congressman Steny Hoyer to be a social worker on his staff.

Finally, she landed the perfect job at Georgetown University Hospital, right down the road from where you were teaching autistic kids. She was hired as the bed hold coordinator, and her job was to ensure nursing home residents who had to go to the hospital didn't lose their beds at their nursing homes. She loved her work, and you both started planning for a life in the suburbs.

Two weeks later, the person she replaced wanted her job back, and your wife was let go.

It was a devastating blow, and you decided it was time to get as far away from the city as possible. Your wife wrote a letter to the captain of the Salvation Army in Missoula, Montana, looking for a job, and amazingly, he wrote her back, saying if she showed up, he would try to find a place for her.

So, you got a U-Haul, packed up the apartment and the cat, and said goodbye to your friends.

But the day before you left, your wife received a phone call from a nursing home in Adams Morgan, a cute neighborhood in D.C. She had interviewed with them six months earlier to be their director of social work and never heard back. Until that call. It was Friday afternoon, and they wanted to know if she could start on Monday.

It feels like déjà vu all over again.

You've played the *What If* game with your wife a couple of times over the years:

What if your wife had gotten the job at the Red Cross?

What if you stuck with graduate school the first time?

What if she had taken the nursing home job?

And now you are at another crossroads in your work life, though like the call from the nursing home, this one seems to have appeared after you passed it.

It's frustrating, and you will spend a few years wondering if you made the right decision, but then the phrase *everything happens for a reason* will flash through your mind when you find your son needing surgery three days after he is born, and the best neonatal surgeon in the country just happens to be in the city you picked for graduate school.

As for your choice in graduate programs, though you don't get what you want from the English program, you get what you need, including a clever but mildly annoying addition to your thesis.

The End

Blindly Submitting

Who the hell is Stanley Fish?

The handsome young graduate student had just walked into the middle of a conversation his colleagues were having about the arrogance of literary theorists who felt they were too famous to adhere to journals' blind submission processes.

"He has earned the right," one of the teaching assistants said.

"He should play by the rules," the graduate student's co-editor replied.

They saw the graduate student at the door and asked what he thought.

Not knowing what to say, but skilled in the art of deflection, the graduate student held up the blue book in his hand and said, "If he's not in these pages, I don't care about him."

Everyone smiled knowingly, and the TAs left so the editors could begin checking the proof.

* * *

It was the mid-90s, and the graduate student was a couple of months into an MA literature program, unable to shake the feeling that he'd faked his way into a world in which he did not belong.

When he first applied, he had hoped an advanced degree in literature would provide the foundation for all his future writings. But he quickly learned he was far behind the other students in the program and had, on many occasions, resorted to a lot of *hmmm*-ing and scratching his chin when they gathered around to shoot the shit about Steinbeck or secondary characters in Charlotte Brontë novels. He started to fear that "Good Point" would become his nickname or epitaph.

To make matters worse, there were few true graduate courses. Most of the classes he took were for undergrads. To get credit, he had to complete one additional paper or give a presentation

at the end of each semester.

Of course, the professors were nice, and the classes were fun, but there was no real sense of community. The graduate student found himself alone in many of the classes. And on the rare occasion a seminar was offered, he was surrounded by classmates in their second (or third) year of the program, which made it feel like he was always the new guy. So, the graduate student threw himself into the real reason he was drawn to this program: the paid opportunity to be on the staff of their highly renowned literature journal, *The Review*, which would surely give him the tools he needed to build his own publishing empire.

* * *

Once he arrived on campus, the graduate student discovered that snagging a spot on *The Review* was not considered the honor he thought it was. There was only one other graduate student on the staff; the rest of the students fought over teaching spots to get the experience they needed to help them swim upstream in the academic river.

The Review technically did not "belong" to the university. It was the publication of a small non-profit organization established in the 1940s to promote the teaching and study of language, literature, and culture in the Western United States. Membership in this mystical Association was available to any professor or student who taught or attended a university on the left side of the map and who could afford the fees.

The Review was half peer-reviewed – articles deemed acceptable through a blind submission process – and half curated – book reviews, translations, and poetry deemed worthy of inclusion by the editors.

Every few years, the journal would be passed from one university to the next, and it had resided at the graduate student's school since the early 1980s. But not many people knew that or

cared, including most professors. They all knew about the school's other literary journal and tried desperately to get their words in that publication; they had little reason to acknowledge *The Review*.

The staff of *The Review* comprised one editor, who also was the graduate student's thesis advisor, and three genre editors: book review, poetry, and fiction – though the fiction editor didn't have anything to do with *The Review*, focusing all of their efforts on the program's favorite child publication. There was an administrative assistant, which the graduate student never met, and two editorial assistants, of which he was one.

Even *The Review*'s office – previously the dining room on the bottom floor of a converted duplex apartment building across the street from the English department – felt like an afterthought.

* * *

When the graduate student arrived at school, the fall issue had already been set, so his first job was to send author proofs to the writers. Once he received the corrections, he made the edits to the electronic copies, then sent the files to the printer on 3.5" floppy disks.

When the blue proof was ready from the printer, the editors would sit in a room and read aloud every word, alternating paragraphs. Each issue was usually around two hundred pages long, each page filled with words from margin to margin in 8pt font. It would take days to get through an entire issue; unfortunately, the graduate student was of little to no help with this part.

The graduate student couldn't spell correctly to save his life. Like most educated in the 1970s, he had learned to read when "look-say" or whole word education was being phased out but phonics hadn't quite arrived on the scene. Teachers had moved from flash cards and rote memorization to letting students sound out words for themselves. So, "school" was "skul" and "goat" was "got." Children were praised and corrected at the same time. His mother, an educator baffled by this new teaching technique, used to say that spelling was his second language, and he

was poor at it.

To compensate, the graduate student always had a dictionary close by. In college, he found his grades on papers improved dramatically when he was given a Brother electronic typewriter that had a spell checker, which allowed you to type one sentence and review it before hitting enter and printing it on paper. By the time he got into grad school, he relied on an electronic dictionary that looked like a Texas Instruments calculator and could fit in his pocket. But, alas, this could not help him as he was reading aloud. Finding mistakes with his eyes, unless they were blatant, was nearly impossible. Nevertheless, he trudged on.

After their days-long editing process, the proof was returned to the editor, who would read it one more time before it was taken to the printer for a final typeset. The graduate student would hold his breath while the proof was with the professor, nervous they would find the mistakes he missed and uncover him as a fraud.

When the issue was back from the printer, there would be long evenings of stuffing all six hundred copies into envelopes, slapping on mailing addresses, and arranging them in ZIP Code order in white plastic mail totes. It was grunt work, like being a gofer on a movie set or a gofer in Hell. It was interesting, but he wasn’t really learning how to run a publication.

* * *

In the fall of the graduate student’s second year, with two issues under his belt and feeling a little better about his editorial abilities, he learned that the journal was moving further west to a more prestigious university at the end of the following year.

His co-editor was set to graduate in December, and he was expected to carry the editorial assistant duties for the last two issues on his own since the university declined to pay for another graduate assistant to replace his friend.

And then, the book review editor decided she no longer wanted to work on *The Review*.

The graduate student was a little bummed. He liked her. Her office was above his in that renovated apartment building. She was a good professor, widely known for her Hemingway expertise, and was always helpful with the journal.

She called the graduate student into her office one day to break the news and to tell him she was recommending him as the interim book review editor until another professor could be found to take over the role.

The graduate student was floored, and scared, and excited, and at a loss for words. Of course, he accepted, and that's when the real fun began.

It wasn't long before the graduate student understood why the book review editor wanted out. His first job was to sift through the hundreds of new books and galleys they received during a semester and pick around thirty he thought would be worth reviewing. Then he was given the magical Book Reviewers Rolodex, which had a little white card for every professor who would review books, their literary specialty, and a list of books they last reviewed. He had to match a professor with a book, then email the professor to see if they were interested. If they were (and there were no conflicts of interest), he would mail them the book and wait.

Most of the time, the graduate student received the reviews back in a couple of weeks. Sometimes, he had to reach out to the professors and give them a little prodding. Only rarely did he fail to receive a response, but when that happened, he made sure to add a black mark to their card in the Rolodex.

In addition to his new duties, the graduate student was still tasked with the usual thankless chores of getting the issue together – compiling the articles and reviews, building the cover, running it through a first edit, setting it for the printer, editing the proof, mailing the issues – all

by himself . . . all while being at the beck and call of the editor . . . all while taking a full load of classes and working a part-time temp job to support his young family.

And the graduate student loved it. He was learning everything he needed to know to run his own publication. He learned about contracts and how to deal with arrogant writers with fragile egos. He learned that printers never made mistakes, editors did, and there was no use arguing otherwise. And he learned that blind submissions weren't always blind.

One day, when meeting with his editor to discuss the next issue, he was told that the first essay in the issue – the prestige spot – had been given to a paper written by the editor's daughter, a graduate student attending a much better literary program than theirs.

The editor was a little too quick to assure the graduate student that her daughter's essay had been vetted by the readers without them knowing who the writer was. Everything was above board.

But the editor knew nothing was ever read with one's eyes fully closed. Who had slipped her paper into the submission pile in the first place? Was it really that good?

The graduate student simply nodded and congratulated the editor on having such a literary-minded child.

The editor then told the graduate student he should pick a book from the slush pile and write a review they also could include in the next issue. A chance to put a publication on your CV, they said.

Distracted by this new opportunity, the graduate student smiled and left the editor's office floating on a cloud.

* * *

No professor wanted to take over as book review editor, so for their last issue, "interim"

was removed from the graduate student's title on the masthead.

Their last issue was smaller than most – sixty-four saddle-stitched pages instead of several hundred perfect bound pages. The graduate student spent most of the semester preparing the publication for transfer to the new editors while writing his own unnecessarily snarky review of a book about gender and narrative strategies found in postmodern fairy tales.

As they drew closer to handing off the journal, the graduate student was banished farther and farther up the stairs until his "office" was a tiny desk and a couple of filing cabinets in the converted attic space, though he did have a small window. But the graduate student didn't care. By that point, he ran the literary journal. Though the editor continued to deal with the main essays, she relied more and more on the graduate student to keep the publication running.

It was a taste of literary power he wouldn't soon relinquish.

PART 6 – THE CUBICLE YEARS

Three Suits to the Wind

How to Decorate a Cubicle

Tight-Lipped

“Layoffs?!”

Three Suits to the Wind

I never earned a Boy Scout knot-tying merit badge. I could never wrap my head – or hands – around the ins and outs of the rope gymnastics that would enable me to keep a boat secured to a dock or a tent from collapsing from the slightest breeze. None of those diagrams with numbers and flowing arrows ever made sense.

I do remember many long, frustrating hours trying to learn how to tie a Windsor knot, the basic throat choker that every man should know, my father told me. You can't make it in this world without knowing how to tie a tie, he would say, as I was bent over my scout manual, trying to figure out how to wrap the fat end of the tie around the thin end to create a triangular knot at the top and equal lengths of fabric below.

I was so proud when I finally learned the technique, yet for the next eighteen years, I think I wore a tie twice: once at church and once for an interview. (For six years in middle and high school, we wore those clip-on bow ties for concert band, and even then, I could never get the damn things to stay perfectly horizontal under my Adam's Apple.)

Now, it's 1998, and I've just landed a job at EDS, the company Ross Perot started before becoming a presidential candidate, and I've been told the dress code is business professional: Women wear jackets and skirts and men wear suits and ties.

I panicked. I didn't own a suit. I barely owned a tie (the aforementioned church/interview tie, which was a thin piece of blue cloth that I still own), and the closest thing I had to dress shoes was a pair of brown boat shoes with soles that slapped against the ground when you walked.

I was coming from the most laid-back office job I'd ever had. Though Boise is a conservative city in an ultra-conservative state, the company I worked for was headquartered in

California, and the dress code was pretty much come as you are. Sure, some execs wore jeans or khakis and polos, maybe even a blue blazer if there was an important meeting, but for most of us – especially the temps – as long as we didn't show too much skin as to be distracting, we could wear what we wanted. In the winter, we wore jeans and bulky sweaters, and in the summer, shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. (Of course, the office was always too hot in the winter and too cold in the summer, so layers of clothes were either added or removed, usually opposite the season outside.)

California casual would not cut it at the new job.

* * *

Electronic Data Systems, or EDS, was founded in 1962 by Ross Perot in Dallas, Texas. After graduating from the Naval Academy, Ross went to work as a salesman for IBM. Legend has it that he was so good at his job, he would make his sales numbers in the first month or two of the year, then spend the rest of the year figuring out how to beat IBM at their own game.

In the early days of EDS, Ross hired ex-military men, and the dress code was strict: suits and polished shoes, and the hair had to be high and tight; facial hair was forbidden.

Their first offices were in a nondescript building in North Dallas, but after his near-immediate success, Ross bought 270 acres of farmland in Plano, about twenty-five miles north of Dallas, and built a glass and white stone structure that towered over the flat land.

In addition to the headquarters building, there were three smaller buildings, a secured data center, a gas/repair station for employees only, and a rec center, again, just for employees. There was a helicopter pad (EDS had two helicopters for the executives) and acres and acres of land that held longhorns and buffalo (for the farm tax write-off).

There was a clause in the building contract that said no buildings could be built taller than EDS, and for years, it stood as a beacon on the plains, seen from miles and miles. On a clear day,

when looking out the windows of the sixth floor – the God Pod, as we called the executive offices in the early years – you could see the Dallas skyline, and there were many afternoons near the end of my tenure, when, after years and years of layoffs and name changes, only a third of the building was occupied, I would sit at my window desk and watch the storms ominously make their way across the land from Fort Worth. The black clouds would slam into the windows, and rain would pound the glass ceilings. It was quite comforting.

I didn't know any of this when my father – a military man hired in the logistics department after he retired – took my resume down to the finance department. They were looking for technical writers to help them update their mainframe software in preparation for Y2K, and I was looking for a way out of Boise.

I got the call for an interview one afternoon, and the manager asked if I would be willing to take an editing test. Normally, she told me, they would have me do it in the office and it would be timed, but seeing how I was a couple of thousand miles away, they could fax it to me as long as I marked it up and faxed it back in twenty-five minutes.

I didn't have a fax machine at home, so I gave them the fax number at work and a time in the later afternoon to send it so my manager wouldn't ask me why I was using the fax machine. When I received it, my co-tempers gathered around, and we team edited the document. I needed the job, and I wasn't leaving anything to chance.

* * *

When I told Robin I got the job, she wasn't too happy about moving to Texas, but Dallas was home to Scottish Rite, a children's hospital that specialized in orthopedic issues, which our young son needed.

What really upset my hippie wife was the dress code. Why, if I were sitting in a cubicle all

day writing and editing software documents, would I need to wear a coat and tie? Who was I going to see?

They were valid questions, but I finally had a real job with real benefits, so I'd wear a bikini if they wanted me to.

Fine, my wife said, but we're not buying new suits. So, we went to Goodwill, and she found three suits: a blue one, a brown one, and a Dijon-yellow one. We bought a couple of used white button downs, and a bright purple shirt (just to stick it to The Man), and since she still had her late father's 1960s and 1970s ties, my corporate nooses were taken care of.

I was set. If it wasn't for the fact that I started work at the end of one of the hottest summers on record, I wouldn't have minded the extra layers. In fact, I almost got used to waking up thirty minutes earlier every morning just to get dressed (the extra twenty minutes were needed for getting the knot on my tie correct).

Then, two weeks after I joined the company, EDS hired a new CEO. He promptly dropped the suit-and-tie requirement, making the dress code business casual – slacks and button-ups for men, dresses and skirts (below the knees, of course) for women – much to the joy of most of the employees and the detriment of an entire dry cleaning industry in town, which had been built solely on the suits worn by the workers at EDS.

* * *

After the dress code changed, I vowed never to wear a suit again, but I didn't donate my dress clothes back to Goodwill, which was a smart move because later that fall, Dr. Stephen Hawking came to give a speech to the company.

Though the entire company would be in attendance, and his speech would be broadcast to all EDS locations across the globe – yes, we had our own TV production crew and satellite dishes

for transmission – a select few would have the honor of meeting and mingling with Dr. Hawking. All you had to do was write an essay about why you wanted to meet Dr. Hawking, and if yours was chosen out of the thousands of entries, you got to spend the afternoon with one of the smartest men on the planet.

Even though I was sure I didn't have a starship's chance of surviving a black hole, I wrote a two-paragraph essay on Dr. Hawking's impact on my work with special needs children, hoping to meet him.

Amazingly, mine was one of twenty-one essays chosen, and before his speech to the company, we got to meet him during a reception and have our picture taken with him.

All of us were a little star-struck, and when it came time to take my picture with Dr. Hawking to commemorate the moment, I said the only thing that came to mind:

"This is better than meeting Santa Claus."

I immediately regretted my flippant remark, but I did get a response from Dr. Hawking that I chose to believe was a chuckle. At least he smiled in the picture.

Illustration 2: Me and Dr. Hawking (and the last time I ever wore a tie to work).

To: Kelly M. (5-4443)

From: David LaBounty

H1-2D-14

797-9983

Re: An Introduction with Dr. Hawking

When I was a special education teacher, I found Dr. Hawking to be a great motivator. Although most of my students didn't have the ability to understand Dr. Hawking's ideas, a few could grasp the magnitude of his importance. Here was a man confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak without computerized assistance, yet people still listened to him. Not only did they listen to him, they respected him.

Dr. Hawking also motivated me to reach for the mind trapped inside the bodies of my more physically challenged students. Dr. Hawking has done a great deal to further our understanding of the universe, but he is a hero to me because of his continuing ability to show that even a mind held captive by a uncooperative body is still free to explore the universe. It would be an honor to meet Dr. Hawking and thank him for his inspiration.[16]

[16] All of the winning essays were collected in a commemorative hardbound book and given to the winners.

How to Decorate a Cubicle

I know wrangling a class of sixth graders is no easy task under normal circumstances, but teaching sixth graders on a military base in the middle of a foreign country that is still technically at war with their neighbors to the north doesn't really count as normal circumstances. From what I remember, Mr. Nelson was a nice guy and a good teacher. Known for his towering stature, mussy blond hair, oversized glasses, and orange and brown plaid suits with wide ties and even wider collars, Mr. Nelson was pretty laid back and easy to get along with. He controlled his class with equal parts humor and discipline.

Mr. Nelson was also a bit of a nontraditional educator. Our desks were not arranged in neat 1950s rows. Sometimes, we sat in a large circle, all the desks facing one another with Mr. Nelson lecturing in the round; sometimes, we sat in a horseshoe shape so we could watch a movie or focus on the blackboard. I remember once, we were allowed to move our desks to any location in the classroom as long as we faced the front of the room. But most of the time, we sat in little pods: four desks pushed together to create a larger square, and those squares floated in various angles like life rafts on the linoleum floor.

Each student sat next to another student and across from two others in this configuration, and we were so close to one another that it was easy to cheat on tests. So, before every test or quiz was handed out, we were instructed to build walls.

We'd reach into our desks and pull out our thickest books, usually the social studies or math books, maybe even an oversized book we picked up from the library, and we would use them to build walls in front and on the sides of the desks to prevent wandering eyes.

But books aren't the best deterrents; they weren't tall and often fell, disrupting the tests.

One day, Mr. Nelson came up with the brilliant idea to use leftover cardboard from an art project to form barriers. He just slipped the cardboard between the desks and pushed them close together so they would stay upright.

Problem solved.

And we liked the cardboard so much we asked to make them permanent.

I don't know who started it, but it began on my pod, and as Mr. Nelson gave us the go-ahead and as the walls went up, so did the decorations. We started drawing cartoons and tapping them to the walls. Some kids "painted" their walls with full sheets of colored construction paper. We'd make little cars out of pink erasers and thumbtacks and mold animals out of rubber cement and place them against the walls to give us something to look at and show off. That's when everyone in class wanted to get involved.

Suddenly, little cardboard walls went up all over the room, and it became a game to see who could decorate their space the best. We had little areas we could call our own, where we could express ourselves in our own way. We were apart, yet together.

Thus, I'm sure, the first elementary school cubicle farm was born.

* * *

I didn't have anything to decorate for many of my early years in the workforce. No office, no cubicle, and as an assistant teacher, I couldn't even decorate the classroom (I'd be lucky if I got a desk).

When I landed my first cubicle job, I was a temp, and even though I worked for the company for a couple of years in various cubicles, I never felt comfortable putting up a picture or bringing in a small plant. So, when I landed my first official job in the business world, at The Corporation, I went crazy with the cubicle decorations.

I adorned the hard plastic desk with tchotchkes and company-logoed knick-knacks. I covered the blue carpeted walls with photos of my family and Crayon pictures created by my kids. I even had a full-sized chess board on the table outside my cubicle so my co-workers and I could play chess while waiting for work. When you walked into my cubicle, you immediately got a sense of who I was; you knew my past and present before I even said a word.

My group worked in finance, rewriting help documentation for mainframe software, but we were all creative types, so I wasn't the only one in my row who expressed themselves with their possessions. One co-worker was a photographer, and walking into her cube was like visiting a small wing of an art museum. One co-worker covered their walls in quotes from famous authors, one we just called the plant lady.

And then the layoffs started.

And I was transferred to another group.

And then The Corporation was sold.

And bought.

And sold again.

And we were sent home for two years.

And then brought back.

And I moved to another organization.

And The Corporation was restructured.

And sold a third time.

In the eighteen years I was with The Corporation, I changed cubicles seven times and buildings three times. I went from the second floor of the main building, with a view of the escalator; to the basement, with no view; to the sixth floor, which was one floor below the God

Pod (where all of the bigwigs walked on two-inch plush carpet and sat in real dark-wood paneled offices). My above-the-clouds-cubicle was spectacular; half of my walls were nearly wall-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the Texas plains. On sunny days, I could see the Dallas Skyline, and I would spend hours watching dark gray clouds roll in from the west until they slammed into the building, and I wondered if the world beyond the glass still existed.

With every move, I pared down my cubicle decorations. I lost the chessboard after the first, extended family pictures after the second, and the kids' drawings after the third. Some of my moves were company-wide and involved everyone packing their cubicles into large orange crates that were shipped from one building on the campus to another, but after seeing my friends and co-workers be dismissed for no reason other than corporate profits, I kept my cubicle decorations to a bare minimum so I could pack up quickly when the time came.

Then, during the 2008 recession, The Corporation gifted everyone with a pay cut and sent us all home, hoping they could weather the storm by not having to pay utilities and maintenance costs on the buildings. By then, I had little to remove from my cubicle, and I took everything home in one empty printer paper box.

When we were called back two years later, I didn't bring anything from home. Except for the keyboard and monitor, my cubicle was empty.

Some of my cubemates still decorated their hovels with family pictures, postcards of famous paintings, and plants. When asked why my cubicle was so void of color and personality, I would say, "It makes it easier to pack up when they ask me to leave."

* * *

Back in sixth grade, our cardboard walls grew taller and more elaborate. Eventually, some of us even added a roof.

That's when Mr. Nelson realized he couldn't see what we were doing. It was easier to goof off – and cheat – in our little boxes, and one day, the walls came down.

Forty years later, The Corporation, like Mr. Nelson, decided they couldn't keep track of us if we were behind walls, so the cubicles started coming down, and everyone was forced to sit at long tables out in the open. It was a nightmare of noise and distractions. But I was already on my way out to a new job, one that offered me the holy grail: an office.

I didn't know what to do with myself in the eight-by-ten-foot enclosure that had a door. It took me a while to get used to it, but I slowly started adding family pictures and knick-knacks. I even put up modest but fun holiday decorations. Then I got cocky and started bringing in books for my shelves and wall hangings. I was feeling pretty good about my space, almost comfortable.

Then Covid-19 hit, and we were all sent home.

* * *

One day, back at The Corporation, when I still had a cubicle, I came to work to find a small drawing pinned to the carpeted wall above my computer screen. It got a good laugh from everyone, including me, and I kept it as the only decoration in my cubicle until the day I left The Corporation. It was the only thing I needed to bring home when I left that job, and it was the first thing I taped to my office wall at my new job. It still hangs in my home office, where I've been working since the pandemic started. It's taped to the filing cabinet next to my desk, which is covered by tchotchkes and knick-knacks and sits in a room with walls covered in posters and pictures that I'm not worried about boxing up.

Until we decide to move again.

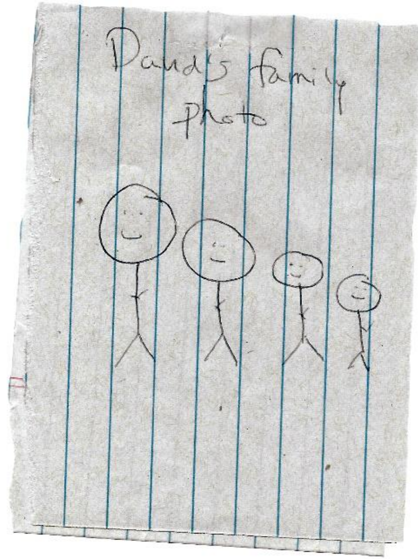

Illustration 3: My family (artist unknown)

Tight-Lipped

Two years ago, a colleague told me in strict confidence that half our company was being sold.

"It's early in the negotiations, so you can't say anything to anyone."

She was the third person who shared that secret with me in as many weeks.

"Who would I tell?" I asked.

It happened often. People confided in me. I have that face, the look of a non-threatening little brother, which is ironic, considering I'm the oldest of three. It's a trait that served me well in my previous career until I realized how much I hated carrying other people's stones.

People still laid bare their darkest secrets to me when I moved into the cube farm of the soulless Corporation, but mostly, it was surface-level chatter. Co-workers would reveal just enough about their lives so that I could recognize the noises coming from the other sides of the blue-carpeted walls were indeed made by human beings. Most were so guarded because we were constantly under the threat of layoffs, and you didn't want to get close to the person next to you, seeing as how no one was guaranteed to make it to the next paycheck.

But at this new company – a tiny organization that constantly claimed to be one big happy family – I knew everyone's business. I knew who was sleeping with whom, who was leaving their spouse, whose kid was in rehab, who was hiding their cancer for fear of losing their job and, in turn, health insurance. People would show up in my office and start talking as if I were Lucy sitting behind The Doctor Is In sign.

I know knowledge is power, and though I was constantly powerless in The Corporation – a tiny cog that if suddenly stopped working wouldn't affect the vast machine – at my new company,

I could have wielded my power to move up the ladder or even destroy lives.

But I didn't.

I was trained in confidentiality.

* * *

I never knew much about my father's day job. A career military man, he joined the Army during the Vietnam War and worked his way up to full colonel.

For most of his career, my father was out of the house before the paper arrived, only to return home long after the evening news. When we did see him, he never talked about work. I knew it had something to do with supply, but I had no idea what he supplied or to whom.

Once, when I was in junior high and we were living just outside of Washington, D.C., my father brought me to his office for Take Your Child to Work Day.

He woke me when it was still dark, the neighborhood eerily silent. The commute north took about thirty minutes, and I remembered being strangely nervous as we came around my favorite bend in I-395 – the spot where you can just see the Potomac River and the Washington Monument in the distance – and the Pentagon came into view.

I remember everything about that day. I remember everyone being so friendly. I remember falling asleep during one of my father's many meetings and being gently ribbed by the other officers who admitted to often doing the same thing, though I didn't believe them. I remember visiting one particular bullpen, where the lower-level officers that worked for my father gave me shell casings expelled from various sizes of weapons of war, some of which I still have.

My dad must have known I wouldn't last the whole day in meetings, so he set me up with the civilian tour of his office building, which took up about an hour. We ate lunch in Pentagon City, and for a couple of hours, I hung out in the courtyard in the center of the building, writing

my paper for class.

I remember walking a lot.

I also remember how quiet it was. For such a large building, where so many people worked, the hallways were nothing like the noisy passageways of my school between periods. Mostly, all you could hear were the clicks and clacks of dress shoes on the polished floors.

Even for my young mind, the lack of idle chatter wasn't much of a mystery. There were the vintage "Loose Lips Sink Ships" posters in the bullpen and the posters of Uncle Sam with his index finger to his lips in various common areas.

Silence wasn't golden – it was an order. And though I was curious about the specifics of my father's work, I knew not to ask long before that term took on a different meaning.

When I left for college, my father was given his own command, an Army depot in the middle of California where the cows outnumbered the people. While he was there, *60 Minutes* wanted to interview him about a rumored secret project on his base.

Of course, the interview never happened. But years after he retired, I asked my father if there really was something nefarious going on in the base's seemingly empty hangers.

He just smiled and said, "I'll never tell."

* * *

I liked my new company; it *was* like a family: small and dysfunctional. But when it was confided in me that "Pops" was selling half his company to a competitor, I was a little pissed, even if I never showed it.

They claimed loyalty, but after just a year with my new family, I was sent away without my consent. I was traded to a new new company for cash and a worker to be named later.

It was a quarter-of-a-billion-dollar deal. A nice payday for "Pops" – "generational wealth,"

some in the breakroom called it – but not a dime for me or my "siblings."

I was in no position to complain. In the middle of a pandemic, paying two college bills and providing healthcare for three unemployed adults, you go where they tell you. So, I made my peace with it. When the announcement was finally made public, my manager, who came over to the new new company with me, was impressed with my calm and professionalism. He was unaware that I had several months to prepare.

* * *

My mom was a special education teacher. Her first job out of college was at a school for the deaf in Washington State until she married my father and took on the role of a military wife.

She never gave up teaching, though. While my sisters and I were growing up, Mom, much to my annoyance, took substitute jobs in the military base schools we attended. It didn't happen often, but there were times I'd show up to class to see my mother standing in front of the blackboard.

When we settled in Northern Virginia, she returned to school full-time as a special education teacher and continued working in classrooms with developmentally delayed children even after my parents moved across the country to California.

Mom rarely talked about her students. She'd sometimes mention other teachers, and once or twice, when feeling a little peeved, she'd rail on the administration. It wasn't until I began my journey working with children that I understood the reason for her professional silence.

Individualized Education Programs, or IEPs, are plans used to evaluate and help educate special education students. IEPs are used by educators and parents to understand their students'/children's abilities and create focused plans for their educations.

IEPs are highly confidential.

When I was an occupational therapist for an autistic child, I had to sign an agreement stating I wouldn't talk about my student, and when I participated in a summer-long university study of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity, I had to sign a box full of nondisclosure agreements. As an educator, I was involved with many IEPs. I was taught that what was in an IEP, stayed in an IEP.

* * *

The threat of corporate espionage was the reason for my silence when I moved to the cubicle at The Corporation. Though I never rose to the level of an employee with access to sensitive information, I was constantly enrolled in trainings and shown videos of why we shouldn't talk about our work outside the walls of our office building. The Corporation was almost militaristic in its demands that we keep our mouths shut.

* * *

Two months after I was shuttled off to my new new company, a friend who was allowed to stay with what was left of the old company called me and said, "He's selling the rest of us to another competitor."

I feigned ignorance, but I was already keeping that secret for someone else. In fact, I knew most of the remaining employees, including my friend, would soon be out of a job.

"You can't say a word to anyone," she said.

"Who would I tell?" I asked.

I could have warned her, helped prepare her for the end. Instead, I promised silence.

It's what I was trained to do.

"Layoffs?!"

I had been in my job for less than two years when my Spidey sense started tingling.

It was a crisp October morning, and I was chatting on Zoom with a colleague about a new project she was working on. Apparently, the higher-ups had asked her and her team to develop a library of help documents that salespeople could search when approaching potential customers. It was a rather involved upgrade to our system, and after I got off the call, I started to feel the dread I thought had gone away when I left The Corporation.

I told my wife about the call and added, "It may be time to start looking for a new job."

She sighed but didn't question my comment. I'd had this feeling too many times before to dismiss it.

* * *

I know when it's the perfect time to leave a job.

I know when I've completed a task and my services are no longer needed. I know when there will be a company reorganization that jeopardizes my job, and I know when those in charge are looking to downsize teams or entire organizations.

My superpower is knowing when it's time to go.

Maybe it's because of all the temp jobs I've had, where you leave the moment the job is done, not before and rarely after. Maybe it's because I taught in elementary schools for several years, usually ending a job after the last day of classes. Maybe it's because I grew up moving every two years. Maybe I'm just an overly paranoid person.

I wasn't always this way. I never worried about losing my job because I left when I wanted to, not when I was told. But once I joined The Corporation, things changed. I had my own family

who relied on my salary and access to healthcare. And then the layoffs began.

I had been there less than six months when I survived my first reduction in force (RIF). For the next eighteen years, I dodged no less than half a dozen layoffs, which didn't include the company being bought and sold, each instance coming with its own restructuring issues.

Before long, I learned to spot the signs of impending downsizing: management changes, missed monetary forecasts, software that simplified roles and eliminated jobs, just to name a few. We even had to deal with external factors in my line of work. New state and local laws could change the services we offered or a competitor could beat us out of a contract, and entire groups of great employees would lose their jobs.

I was good at adapting (most military brats are). I knew how to focus on the aspect of my job that made it seem like I was invaluable. I knew how to avoid toxic co-workers and projects that would spell my peril. And when I sensed I couldn't avoid being asked to go, I changed organizations within The Corporation. I learned how to depart a team with little to no disruption by finishing projects ahead of schedule and reassigning my work to other team members. I was so good at tying up loose ends, my managers and co-workers missed me but were often left wondering why they needed me in the first place. (In truth, most didn't. And I knew that too.)

I wasn't the rat that left the sinking ship. I was the rat that got off the boat at the last port of call and watched it sail away into a hurricane from the safety of the docks.

* * *

Out of the blue, a week after that Zoom call, I was contacted by a recruiter for a management position at a small educational software company in Dallas. The pay was good, and the chance to run my own team was appealing.

I saw it as the second sign that it was time to leave my current company.

I agreed to an interview with the recruiter, and it went well enough that I was asked to meet with the company's VP.

Before my second interview, I reached out to my old manager I had worked for during most of the moves and iterations of The Corporation. She once enrolled me in leadership training classes, which were immediately canceled due to our company being sold. And the one time my name appeared on a RIF list, she fought to keep me on her team.

I contacted her for some tips about interviewing for the position, and she was more than willing to help. Near the end of the call, she said, "You know, if you are looking for a job, we're hiring."

I politely declined. Technically, she was still working for The Corporation. Sure, the name had changed, but all the faces were the same. "It's much better than it used to be," she added. "I finally feel like we all have job security." She added, "Think about it."

I told her I would, but I knew I wouldn't.

I interviewed for the managerial position the week between Christmas and New Year's. The company sat on the top two floors of a golden skyscraper near downtown Dallas. As I headed down a packed I-75 for the interview, I realized it if I got the job, it would be my longest commute since the early nineties when I taught in Washington, D.C., the commute that made me promise myself I would never live far away from where I worked; the commute that literally ended all commutes for me.

No one was in the office because of the holidays and Covid, but the VP told me they were expecting everyone to start coming back to the office in February. I wasn't thrilled about that, knowing there was no need to perform our jobs in the office, but I was excited about being in such a creative environment.

The interview wasn't a disaster, but long before it ended, I think we both knew it wouldn't be a good fit. Afterward, she said she'd call, and I knew she wouldn't (and she never did, nor did the recruiter – not even to say, 'Thanks, but no thanks.')

So, no new job, and the initial bad feeling about the current job had only increased as the time from my first feeling in October had passed. But then, a little less than a week after the interview, I received a text from my old manager:

Are you proceeding with the management role you were considering? If you are not committed to it, let me know. I may have the perfect opportunity for you. :-)

* * *

It wasn't perfect, but it was much better than my current situation. Yes, I was returning to The Corporation, but the small company I worked for was suddenly bought by a larger fish, and that fish had a documentation department already doing the work I was doing. They really had no need for me. My initial worry was spot on.

Before I accepted my old manager's offer, she told me that The New Corporation was owned by a venture capitalist organization. The New Corporation was bought but a bunch of guys who were hoping to sell it for an outrageous profit – and they were two years into their five-year sell plan.

So, the clock is ticking. I'll be happy if I survive in this position for another two years, and I'll be pleasantly shocked if I make it to my third anniversary.

But I'm already starting to see cracks in the dam. The New Corporation threw a ton of money recruiting people, and now there are too many employees for the work. And with a recession looming. . . .

It's time to update my LinkedIn.

PART 7 – TBD

To Be Determined

To Be Determined . . .

By my calculation, if I'm fortunate enough to continue in my current job, which I'm not terribly thrilled with; Social Security stays solvent, which my generation has been told for thirty years is a coin flip; and the country doesn't devolve into civil war, which, well, odds of that happening seem to increase with every election; then I think maybe, possibly, there's a slight chance I might be able to retire six years after I'm dead.

Many of my friends are looking to voluntarily leave the workforce early, hoping to have more free time before they hit their sixties. Yet, they're discovering that paying for healthcare for several years before Medicare kicks in could drain most of their savings. Some have realized retirement may mean getting a part-time job to help pay the bills.

Some of my friends look at retirement as a chance to change careers. They are comfortable in their current jobs, yet they long to do something else. They may even know what that something else is, but they lack the ambition to leave what's comfortable and pays well on the off chance that their dream job will come to fruition.

I don't even know if I would retire if I could.

* * *

In 1994, President Clinton gave a speech at the Group of Seven Jobs Conference in Detroit. He repeated a line that made me smile the first time I heard him say it: "When I address audiences of young people, I tell them they will probably change jobs seven or eight times in a lifetime."

I was twenty-six and already on my fourth post-college job when President Clinton gave that speech. If I counted the jobs I had during college, I was at seven. By the time my children were born and I settled down in my cubicle, the work entries on my resume had grown into the

high teens.

Today, I am in my second career and looking for my third.

* * *

A little more than three years ago, I saw the signs on the cubicle wall and left The Corporation. I landed in a small company doing the same work, but the hours were better and the duties weren't as demanding. After a few months, I grew bored. I also knew my job wasn't guaranteed for five years, let alone another fifteen, so I began thinking about what I could do next.

I enrolled in the online MFA program at The University of Texas at El Paso for two reasons: to finish something I started twenty-five years ago but, more importantly, to help me become a better teacher, with the hopes of one day returning to the classroom.

I don't know what the next line on my resume will be. But I am excited to find out.

VITA

David LaBounty's plays have appeared in *Plays* magazine and are represented by Brooklyn Publishers; they have been performed in classrooms, cafeterias, and on main stages across the country. One of his plays for adults ran for several weeks at the Plays-In-Progress Theater in Eureka, California; another play was a finalist in the Texas Nonprofit Theatre's POPS Playwriting Contest and was staged at the McLaren Comedy Festival in Midland, Texas.

David's fiction and essays have appeared in numerous children's and general interest magazines; his scholarly articles on children's literature have appeared in *The Five Owls* and *The Looking Glass*.

David has reviewed dozens of books for daily and national newspapers and is the author of two perzine collections: *The Vellum Underground* and *Bookstores and Baseball*.

Currently, David runs Blue Cubicle Press, where he publishes the award-winning and internationally recognized literary journals *Workers Write!* and *The First Line*.