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“It’s not too late to take the Sanitation test”

On parent–teacher night, my fourth-grade teacher, Sister Stephen-Marie, told my mom I’d do better in school if I simply tried harder. My mom wasn’t surprised. She knew I wasn’t much of a schoolboy. I was reading lots of comic books, though, in Dougie’s basement and Tommy Malloy’s attic. That was the extent of my reading habits. In school, I could hardly finish the shortest of assignments. I was a junior in high school before I read a book on my own, an accomplishment that required three bullets. Some of my teachers used to say I had to have a gun pointed at my head before I’d read anything. That was only half true. Someone obviously needed to pull the trigger.

Periodically, other teachers echoed Sister Stephen-Marie by describing me as a perennial underachiever who rarely applied himself. I just didn’t take to books, unlike the working-class academics who fill the pages of such anthologies as *This Fine Place So Far from Home* and *Working-Class Women in the Academy*, along with better-known individuals such as Richard Rodriguez. Even more famous figures from the past refer to books as stepping-stones in helping them climb out of the working class. Apprenticed to an engraver at a young age, Jean-Jacques Rousseau recounts in his *Confessions* that he “did nothing but read.” His “enthusiasm became a passion and soon a kind of madness.” He had grown “bored with [his] fellow-apprentices,” and then with “everything.” He literally sold the shirts off his back to purchase more books from printers. Books provided a distraction, a way out, eventually leading to fame.

More recently, the chroniclers of working-class academic narratives also boast about their youthful obsession with books, their means of escape, and their increasing cultural capital. As they describe it, books supplied the sheen on their early academic achievements, frequently establishing them as "gifted" among their less academically inclined (and far less bookish) working-class peers. Books called attention to their extraordinariness, and teachers noticed. They stood out and were encouraged to get out of the working class. Reading lots of books in their youth made them bright stars in a rather dull constellation. I was one of those dullards who burned dimly.

I never shone academically in my youth. I certainly was never mistaken for a prodigy. Rather than successes, I had catalogued a steady history of academic shortcomings, and books played no part in my life until I had nearly graduated from high school. As a consequence, books didn't feed an urgency to leave the working class or fuel a simmering desire to enter higher education, whereas books are what most working-class academics flaunt as the wings giving them flight and as the totems proving they belong in the academy.

I therefore never attributed to books the same kind of exchange-value as most of my working-class academic colleagues. I never wanted that from my books; maybe it's been a backhanded advantage to have come so late to them now that I am a teacher—a professor of English, no less. For me, books furnished something different (a difference reflected in my teaching). Admittedly, I was probably too shortsighted in my youth to think of books as supplying social mobility. I didn't see them as my great escape. Besides, throughout my schooling books were deployed to keep me down. I didn't think they could be used to pick me up. To the nuns and lay teachers at St. Charles, a bad reader equaled a bad student and a bad student equaled a bad person. And whether I was being characteristically foolish or overly optimistic, I became a reader because I believed books would make me a wiser, better person, but not in the sense of being righteously better than others. As I lay in the ER, I thought if I made it out of there alive I'd be better off with books than without them. That's how I came to books. Or maybe that's how they came to me. I thought my (new) life depended on them. To put it more simply, I believed books could help me figure out stuff about myself and about the world. Maybe they could be a beacon *and* an anchor. Sure, there may have been no correlation between being shot and the absence of books in my life. There were plenty of other forces involved. Nevertheless, there's no denying I

was troubled and lost in my youth. The absence of books may have made finding my way rockier and darker. I was nearly blown away without them. Maybe I could do better with them.

One of the first things I did after being released from the hospital was to walk to the New Dorp Public Library, located about a mile from our house. On my way there I saw a neighbor raking leaves in her front yard. It was a beautiful mid-October morning, similar to the kind of sunny, crisply dry day New Yorkers now associate with 9/11. I remember wearing shirt-sleeves as I left the house for the library. Our neighbor was also dressed for Indian summer. She seemed surprised to see me. It had been less than two weeks after I was nearly shot to death. Yet there I was, like an apparition, walking past her house. Her astonishment quickly changed into contempt, frozen on her face like ice. She stared at me for a few seconds, apparently disgusted that I had the nerve to show my face ever again in the neighborhood. She deliberately turned her back and resumed raking. It had its intended effect: It cut me like a knife. I would carry that encounter with me for the rest of my life. In some ways, she did me a favor. Her reaction further motivated me to rise above whatever image she had of me that made her react that way. It also further inspired me to stay steadfast in my quest, for I was certain that books would be the instrument of my transformation. After that day, whenever I walked past her house I hoped she’d see me lugging my books, a witness to my labors. I only wished I was carrying a copy of *Fuck You: It’s Never Too Late to Change*. Maybe, I thought, walking past her house, I would write it someday. Maybe this is it.

Inside the library I was smitten—and overwhelmed, despite its being an extremely small library. The entire adult and children’s collections were contained on a single floor, the total square footage covering not much more than the floor space of our modest home on Flint Street. The adult section had perhaps as few as ten rows of bookcases, roughly four feet high, along with floor-to-ceiling shelves along the entire back wall. The “Fiction & Literature” section was located there. I had no idea what the difference was between “fiction” and “literature” (even as an English professor I still don’t, aside from the official canonical declarations). I headed straight for the back wall anyway. I think the “literature” half of the category appealed to me. It sounded robust, and a requisite place to begin if I planned on undertaking my mission seriously. As I slowly walked along the back shelves, my eye was drawn to a series of similarly bound, hard-cover editions that appeared repeatedly along the wall. Below each of the sometimes recognizable titles was inscribed “World Classics.” “Literature”

had first drawn me to the back wall. "World Classics" sweetened the deal. I wanted to read those books—all of them!—in no small part because they announced themselves as "worldly." I needed a good dose of *worldly* if my mind were to free itself from its provincialism and my failure to live an examined life.

Some authors in the series warranted multiple volumes. I recognized some of them, like Dickens and Twain. Many others I didn't. I moved through the stacks in alphabetical order and nearly halfway through I decided to stop. At eye-level I spotted an unrecognizable author, Thomas Hardy, who warranted the "Classic" heading for several books. I grabbed the one with the most interesting and germane (to me) title, *The Return of the Native*. For some reason, I started reading from the second chapter. I was immediately captivated by the first passage:

Along the road walked an old man. He was white-headed as a mountain, bowed in the shoulders, and faded in general aspect. He wore a glazed hat, an ancient boat-cloak, and shoes; his brass buttons bearing an anchor upon the face. In his hand was a silver-headed walking-stick, which he used as a veritable third leg, perseveringly dotting the ground with its point at every few inches interval. One would have said that he had been, in his day, a naval officer of some sort or other.

But as I continued reading I understood less and less, especially following a block of colloquial dialogue. I didn't know the meaning of every eighth or ninth word. I knew I couldn't begin with that book, or any of the "Classic" volumes. It wouldn't be a "good read" if I couldn't understand it. I would have to return to Hardy in the future, along with his worldly textual family. I eventually did, but not before being rerouted through action-adventure thrillers and mysteries.

After returning the Hardy volume to the shelf, I continued gazing at the other titles along the wall. "Can I help you?" a woman's voice asked. I was too engrossed to notice that a librarian was standing beside me. She was smiling.

"No," I said automatically, as if we were standing in a department store. "I'm just looking."

"Okay," she replied. "If you need any assistance, feel free to ask."

"Wait," I said, as she began walking away. "Maybe I do need some help."

I explained that I was a poor reader and had read little, but I wanted to start reading a lot more. I had enjoyed reading *Jaws*, I told her, and I wondered where to go from there.

"I was reading some of this," I said, sliding back toward the lower part of the alphabet, and pointing to the Hardy novel. "But I can tell it's too hard for me—for now."

She led me to the "New Books" section and picked out a recently published book by Alistair MacLean. "Here," she said. "I think you might like this." I can't exactly recall which MacLean book she handed me, in part because after reading it I read everything he wrote. A recent Google search revealed that *Breakheart Pass* came out in 1974, and so that might have been it. I was shot in the autumn of 1974. MacLean mostly wrote lean, muscular World War II spy thrillers, such as *The Guns of Navarone*, *Ice Station Zebra*, and *Where Eagles Dare*, many of which were turned into successful movies.

When I finished reading the MacLean books the library had, I headed over to the Staten Island Mall and bought the first of many missing MacLean works at the now-defunct B. Dalton bookstore. It was *Force 10 from Navarone*. It was the first book I bought in my life. After reading it, I treated it like an icon, as I would the remaining MacLean books I purchased. Piled on the small desk in my room, they were the bricks I had envisioned, and I would sometimes stare at them as if they held all of the world's mysteries and its answers. I wanted so badly to believe in their potential for my own sake that I invested in them far more merit than they likely possessed. Nonetheless, similar to Benchley's shark tale, they were the building blocks to increasing my literacy, which is why as a teacher I continue to object to forcing students to read Great Works of Literature because it's "good" for them when they may be barely literate to begin with. If anything, by suffering and struggling through *The Scarlet Letter* in school an adolescent or a young adult may end up learning the wrong lesson: to hate reading and to find books boring. Based on nearly twenty years of teaching experience, most of the students in my college General Education courses are about as "literate" as I was then. As "tasteless" or "popular" or "simplistic" as many cultural critics or English teachers might view MacLean's books and others like it, they did launch my personal literacy campaign and inaugurate my tactile fascination with books.

If I were to re-read MacLean today, I'd have the same initial reaction to him as I did with *Jaws* when I re-read it for my Popular Fiction senior seminar. I'd wince at the simple prose—and then get sucked into the stories. However simplistic the prose may seem now, back then I was occasionally bogged down with the words I didn't understand. I repeatedly consulted the dictionary, growing frustrated when I needed to look up the same damn words more than once. How stupid was I, for heaven's sake! I

began to fear that my misspent youth had permanently wrecked my mind. My unschooled and untrained brain apparently required special treatment. I needed a plan. I bought a small, sky-blue, 3" × 5" spiral notebook and started creating my own dictionary. When I came across a word I didn't know I wrote it in the notebook along with its dictionary definition. I assumed that the physical act of writing the definition on the page would help me remember the word the next time it appeared. For the most part, it worked. I wasn't constantly looking up the same words, although whenever I "reviewed" the list I would sometimes find a word written down twice. When I did, I would turn to the back of the notebook and write a couple of sentences using the word, in hopes I might be able to commit it to memory. When I abandoned the project, sometime around my senior year at Boston University, I had filled it up entirely. I held on to it for years, as a keepsake and as a reminder of my progress. If I saw it now, I'm sure I'd be embarrassed by the words contained in it. But when I was compiling the list it consisted of difficult words. At the start of my reading adventure, even popular spy thrillers posed a challenge to me from time to time. I had a lot of catching up to do. As do many of my students. Now, I keep those early experiences of my advancing literacy uppermost in my mind as a teacher, maintaining Zen-like patience with my "nongifted" students. It's not my job to point out their debilities and create additional frustrations with their learning. I have to hope for the best and for progress in all of them, however fleeting that potential may seem from time to time. Otherwise, there's no point in my presence. I hand them some straw and mud and *maybe* they'll start making some bricks with it too, just as I did.

After finishing MacLean's adventure novels, I tried reading similar books, but none appealed to me. Perhaps MacLean was king of the genre, or perhaps I was exhausted with it. I again asked the librarian for help, the same one who'd offered it on that memorable day. I made a beeline to her as soon as I walked into the place. She was busy with someone else, but that didn't stop me from going to her, probably causing her to feel uncomfortable as I impatiently waited for her to finish talking to an elderly woman. I wanted to shove the old woman aside, I was so eager to start down another path. Finally, *my* librarian led me to Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, recognizing that I shouldn't stray too far from the field just yet. From there, I was off and running. Soon, I was able to revisit the back wall and begin reading those classics I'd had my eye on. But before then, I had to deal with the more dense Chandler material. I was inserting many more words in my dictionary and the plots were thicker to wade through.

I was completing my summer of reading Hammett and Chandler when I entered Mr. Larson’s English class in my senior year. On the first day, he went around the room asking us who our favorite authors were. I didn’t have many authors to choose from, clearly. When it was my turn, I said Chandler, and I meant it, unlike some of the other students who seemed to tell him what they thought he wanted to hear. I was expecting “The English Teacher” to scoff at my lowbrow selection. Instead, Mr. Larson was impressed with it. “Chandler, you say! Excellent choice! My boy, he is, in my humble opinion, one of the best, under-appreciated modern American writers. A real stylist—a great one, to be precise. And I dare anyone to find another author who deals so honestly, and so consistently, with the subject of class.” I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. I would, in time, but at that point I read the guy to unravel the murder mysteries and be intoxicated by the snappy prose and witty dialogue. What I did understand, though, was that someone had praised me for my reading habits.

Chandler and Hammett came to a fast end. I plowed through both during the summer months. The dust jacket of one of Chandler’s detective novels left a clue for where I might turn next. It noted that not since Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes had a writer invented such an intriguing detective as Philip Marlowe. It was all I needed. I raced through Arthur Conan Doyle’s short stories, then devoured in quick succession the detective novellas *The Sign of the Four*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and *A Study in Scarlet*. Reading Doyle was different. Because he was “foreign” and not a contemporary writer, I became interested in learning about Edwardian England—its history, politics, and culture—to see if that might lead to a more enriching reading experience. I also began reading about Doyle “the writer” and the construction of his famous fictional character, eventually learning that he’d likely based Holmes on another fictional detective, perhaps the first of its kind, Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin. The game was now truly afoot. Authors and texts were building on one another. The bricks were beginning to resemble a structure of sorts, not spread out willy-nilly, and the expanding edifice owed its existence to that first brick. I’ve found that as a teacher, it’s essential to distribute bricks to students rather than insist they inhabit *our* buildings right from the start. They need to assemble their own places, just as I assembled mine. It’s more interesting and amusing that way, and it also means they have to make their own decisions about which bricks they want to use. If teachers make all of those decisions for them, they won’t bother building anything for themselves. They’ll remain uncritical renters. In time, I’d reach similar conclusions

about student writing. They need to own that too, even if it begins as a dilapidated shack.

I devoured Poe like a gourmand, but he was the most challenging author to date. I seemed to be looking up a lot more words. I typically had to re-read a story after compiling its dictionary. I'd pore over the words and "test" myself before the second reading. In doing so, I began to appreciate the stylistic devices and "tricks" that infused the tales, often informing the story and adding to its richness. I remember thinking how cool it was that style and substance were so happily wedded and how singular Poe's writing "voice" was. In looking ahead (far ahead) I wondered if I could ever write like that someday. In the meantime, I knew that reading Poe was better than reading *Jaws*. Compared with the latter, the former was masterly. I felt ready to return to Hardy.

I was partly mistaken. I finished *Return of the Native*, but I slogged through most of it, and I didn't understand half of it, but neither disadvantage prevented me from enjoying it and admiring it. Like Poe, it was heady stuff, but on a grander scale and there were breathless passages that perfectly captured the mood and the sentiment of a scene, with the characters leaping off the page as if they had a pulse. The summer between Johnson & Wales and enrolling in Boston University I was going through my "Russian phase," reading the usual suspects—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Chekhov, and Gogol. At the same time, there was a good deal of press about Vladimir Nabokov's recently published essays, taken from his class notes when he was teaching at Cornell, one volume entitled *Russian Literature*. I sat in a Providence library reading it and recall being struck by his commentary about the genius of Tolstoy, his ability to draw characters as if they were walking beneath our windows. Invention could be that artfully imaginative. I started wondering if the reader required as much imagination as the author and whether when I picked up *Jaws* three years before I would have had enough imagination to have read *Anna Karenina*. If so, would reading more complicated material increase my imagination? Do some books tap into my imagination more deeply and therefore foster its growth? As a teacher, I hope I am encouraging my students to think more imaginatively and critically, but that old debate hasn't been settled yet—on whether certain kinds of books do that better than others. For me, the jury is still out. Increasing my students' literacy seems like a pretty tall order these days anyway. Maybe that's enough—or maybe I'm not doing enough.

More instinctively than deliberately did I return to Hardy and the

"classics" after MacLean and Poe. At the time, I wasn't concerned with advancing my cognitive skills by reading headier material. I wasn't planning on building a better brain. I wanted to build a better person. If increased imaginative powers were its byproduct, I could certainly live with that. But that was an afterthought. Correctly or not, I assumed that the "classics" contained the best chances for my conversion. That was my main reason for starting to read them. I was additionally drawn to the "classic" brand because it included such authors as Plato, Gibbons, and Freud. In the back pages of Hardy, I saw a list of additional "classic" books that weren't stacked along the "Fiction & Literature" section. I started with literature because it made more sense to segue from *Where Eagles Dare* to *As I Lay Dying*. But if I could someday get through *The Leviathan* and *The Origin of Species* then I'd have proved to myself I had traveled a long way from sticking up pizza delivery drivers with an empty water pistol.

In the beginning, however, I focused on the titles shelved on the library's back wall. For some silly reason, I dismissed the ones that had been made into films, such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *War and Peace*, and *The Three Musketeers*. As movie adaptations, I equated them as less serious than the other texts. Whether or not I read *Crime and Punishment*, *The Red and the Black*, or *Madame Bovary* first, after *The Return of the Native*, didn't make much difference. I had trouble wrapping my head around all of them. But I stuck with it and my dictionary was filling up faster than Webster's. Despite my bumpy, sometimes incoherent start, these classic works of literature did adhere to the basic element that had made *Jaws* such a good book: They were good reads, even if gaps existed in my fully understanding them. (Many I've re-read since, but it's like reading them for the first time considering how little I remember.)

I was nearly a high school graduate, then, before I could safely call myself a reader, and still a relatively poor one at that. Academically, I was gaining ground, but I was certainly nowhere near being "gifted," like other working-class academics, which explains why my parents dissuaded me from attending college, followed by discouraging me from attending law school and then graduate school. Talented working-class academics write about their parents' encouraging them, in some cases shoving them off to prestigious schools, scholarship in tow. But they were kids who excelled in school and who were bookish at a very young age. Even for some who weren't terribly "gifted" in their youth, family support remains a commonality among working-class academic narratives. We learn in *Lives on the Boundary* that Mike Rose didn't really get going academically until he attended Loyola University in southern California—thanks to the help

of a high school teacher—but his “parents [still] used to say that their son would have the best education they could afford,” and that maybe he “would be a doctor” some day. When I told my mom I wanted to be a doctor right after I’d been shot, she practically laughed in my face. Unlike me, though, Rose had been bookish as a child, so at least he had that going for him in the eyes of his parents. As impoverished as his family was, Rose managed to wheedle “enough change out of [his] father to enable [him] to take the bus to the public library.” With his “back aching” from reading his plentiful supply of books, which he’d “sometimes read through the weekend,” Rose appeared to family and friends the way other working-class academics appeared to theirs: bookish, and therefore unlike most working-class kids, who weren’t. As he tells us, while “reading opened up the world” for him, he also became “a skinny bookworm drawing the attention of street kids.” If I drew the attention of any street kids in my youth it sure as hell didn’t have anything to do with books.

In *Hunger for Memory* Richard Rodriguez admits that he began grade school speaking barely fifty words of English. But books propelled him forward, all the way to Stanford. So quick was his rise that he had read hundreds of books by the time he entered high school. I had barely read a few dozen by the time I graduated from it. I had grown into a better student, but compared with other working-class academics, no one was handing out scholarships to me, as happened to Keith Gilyard. As he explains in *Voices of the Self*, both Notre Dame and the University of Connecticut offered him scholarships—and he was a junkie from Harlem, for heaven’s sake. But he and other working-class academics had established themselves academically long before they graduated from high school. Despite his rough-and-tumble history outside of school, Gilyard was still considered college material inside of school. Based on his long, impressive academic track record, teachers and family urged him to join the ranks of higher education. No one in my circle did for me. Given my long, unimpressive academic track record, I would’ve been lucky if my family and teachers had urged me to attend Hamburger University in Illinois.

Now that I am a professor, my bookless childhood of school failures makes me wonder if I share much with other working-class academics, the majority of whom admit to feeling uneasy about their place in the academy. I don’t. I earned my stripes the hard way, and I’m proud of it. If anyone wants to turn their back on me, like my neighbor who was raking leaves that day, that’s their problem, really, not mine. Furthermore, many working-class academics aren’t terribly gung-ho either about allowing their working-class roots to show. I couldn’t care less. I’ve made

no attempt to color mine. I still prefer the direct, matter-of-fact style of working-class speech, as opposed to the verbose, meandering style of academic discourse. More important, my sputtering education, which differs sharply from those in “gifted” narratives, mirrors the conditions of many of my own nontraditional students, who often are from the working class. No “genius” history operates as a barrier between students and me, and I’ve never felt uncomfortable about coming from the working class.

I started thinking about this a few years ago when I obtained my doctorate and landed my first full-time job at a community college in the Bay Area. I also had begun reading working-class academic narratives. I read as many as I could get my hands on, and there were plenty. It all came to an episodic head during the winter break when I went home to Staten Island, the same borough that spawned Melanie Griffith’s character in the film *Working Girl* and was the butt of jokes for those Manhattan socialites in the TV series *Sex and the City*. It’s a place where cops, firemen (trust me, *they* don’t call themselves firefighters), nurses, construction workers, beauticians, secretaries, mid- to low-level corporate types, elevator maintenance mechanics, and other trade unionists reside, along with a good number of organized-crime foot soldiers, some of whom I likely I grew up with. Even the criminals on Staten Island are bossed around.¹

While home, I went with my mother to see two of her sisters, two of my former Russian Roulette, day care providers, if you recall, Mary and Donnatelle, eighty-year-olds who shared a two-family house their entire adult lives. Aunt Mary and Aunt “Do-Do” were the kind of working-class housewives who often outlive their husbands by ten or twenty years because they incessantly lug baskets of laundry up and down stairs like Sisyphus and scrub tiny kitchen floors so clean that protective eyewear is required. I was quickly seated at the kitchen table, they being the Italian half of my Polish-Italian heritage, to drink kegs of coffee and eat stacks of homemade zeppoles, holiday staples around my mother’s family. As I wiped powdered sugar off my chin and dusted it off my shirt, my Aunt Mary complained that her sister-in-law wouldn’t stop bragging about her daughter who’d married a surgeon. “For Christ’s sake, he’s not even her first husband.”

Stuffed with zeppoles and soaring from caffeine, I lowered my eyes, compressed my mouth, and nodded my head, proof of my profound understanding and enduring sensitivity—and as a deft way to glance at my watch. Sometimes these “quick visits,” as my mother liked to call them, might last for hours. I had already “done my time,” I told myself, when she and my father were separated. Such visits reminded me of when I sat

at my grandmother's kitchen table as a child. If I didn't respond to my aunt, maybe the afternoon would go faster. My mother, who sat across from me, didn't remain silent. "Well," she began, rising stiffly in her seat, "why don't you tell her about David, that you have a nephew who is a doctor of . . . of . . . of?" She was struggling. "Of philosophy," I calmly said. "Right," she hurriedly resumed, "that you have a nephew who is a *Doctor of Philosophy*." She placed as much emphasis on the "doctor" part as possible. Aunt Mary, who sat at the far end of the table, slowly and mechanically swiveled her head toward me, like a gunner's turret. She peered at me, but only for a moment. Suddenly, she barked: "For all of the time you spent in school you coulda been a *real* doctor." My mother slouched into her chair, diminished. "Oh, Mare," she screeched, "what'd you have to say that for?" followed by a gushing celebration of my vocation as Doctor of Something-or-Other. But it was evident she hadn't the slightest idea what I'd done to acquire my doctorate or what I was doing with it now. For my part, I again nodded and said nothing, thinking: Yes, *for all that schooling I could have been a real doctor—as opposed to the fake one I did become*. But I had another thought, less sarcastic and more theoretical. I retreated into the kind of abstract decoding typical of any incisive Phony Doctor of Humanities worth his or her keep: This scene surely must fit into any number of working-class academic conflicts in those narratives I'd been reading.

One such conflict is categorized by editors Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey in *Strangers in Paradise* as the "imposter-syndrome," the sense that working-class academics, like those *Saturday Night Live* characters from "Wayne's World," are "not worthy" of being in higher education. When it comes to genuine intellectual timber, many working-class academics believe they just don't cut it, and it'll be only a matter of time before the authentic scholars figure it out. That's what Louis Potter in *Strangers* worries about—exactly when will his working-class past and his colleagues' present perception of him collide? "When will they find out I'm a fraud?" he wonders.² John Koonings holds similar views, considering himself an "interloper" who does "not belong in the academy."³ Julie Charlip shares their fears. In her testimony in *This Fine Place*, she admits that "despite my accomplishments—awards, fellowships, teaching assistantships—I still have the sneaking suspicion that someone will shout 'Fraud!' and send me away."⁴ In *Working-Class Women in the Academy*, Donna Langston substantiates the trope established by Ryan and Sackrey by describing herself outright as "an imposter."⁵

But feeling like a charlatan has its flip side, turned on its head when

Aunt Mary said I was no real doctor. Evidently, the imposter-syndrome can hit from below as well as from above. The families we come from can see us as “fake” doctors just as surely as can the colleagues to whom we climb up. In my case, my immediate family didn’t think I had even the intellectual wherewithal to attend undergraduate school. They couldn’t imagine my graduating from college, let alone imagine my becoming a fake doctor. Perhaps, then, I could see myself in those narratives, so long as I focused on feeling humiliated, even if the humiliation was driven from the bottom rather than from the top.

After all, I had every reason to feel inadequate “from below,” considering how frequently my family doubted my intellectual abilities. In fact, what I most remember about that day at my aunt’s is how my mother impulsively celebrated my alleged doctor-hood, as if all along she had persistently supported my efforts to obtain a Ph.D. If anything, the exact opposite was true. While listening to her unexpectedly proud defense, I remembered that the year before, a few days after I’d submitted the first three chapters of my dissertation for review, she’d mailed me an article from the *Staten Island Advance* reporting that the New York City Sanitation Department was conducting a citywide test to fill hundreds of openings. For years, a hiring freeze had existed because of city budget cuts. She highlighted a passage which warned that the test must be taken before an applicant’s fortieth birthday. I was fast approaching that milestone. At the bottom of the page, neatly printed in red ink for maximum visibility, she’d added, “You’d better hurry.”

A few days later, she phoned. Right before hanging up, she asked, “Oh, by the way, did you get what I sent you?” Needless to say, I knew “what” she was referring to. That’s really why she had called. The miscellaneous chit-chat was pretext for the primary message. “Yes,” I replied. “Yes, I did. Thank you. I’ll look into it,” I lied. I could hear the relief at the other end. “Oh, good, do that. It’s not too late, you know. Really, Dave, it’s not too late to take the Sanitation test.” I didn’t respond. There was a long pause at the other end. “You know, it would be a good backup plan,” she continued. “How much security will you have with your degree, if you ever get it, and then what are your chances of getting a job anyway?” I didn’t feel the need to tell her there was no way in hell I planned on taking the Sanitation Department test a few months shy of receiving my Ph.D. After all my schooling, and all those books, what did she want me to become, Lord of the Flies?

As a matter of fact, she did. Being a college professor didn’t make sense to her. It wasn’t real work for a real man. Her brother Sammy, the World

War II veteran auto mechanic, was a real man who performed a man's job. Her attitudes about what constituted appropriate work for a man were similar to those of most people in our working-class community, especially males. There was, and still is, a lot of pressure on working-class males not to be bookish or overly educated. It's uncool, for one thing. For another, only wimps, nerds, and fags are into books. As Richard Rodriguez admitted, he "suspected that education was making [him] effeminate."⁶ (Imagine if he had admitted back then that he was gay, rather than leave it out. It would have confirmed to other working-class males that books indeed did turn boys into sissies. Maybe that's why he withheld that very big truth from the book.) My mother held the same opinions about the usefulness of books and higher learning as did most of the men in her circle. Sissies read books and escapists went to college. My Uncle Sammy never went to college and he never read books. As part of the Greatest Generation, he almost singlehandedly saved the world from fascism—well, at least according to my mom. Moreover, what did books and college do for the next generation, except turn them into campus protesters, draft dodgers, hippies, and dope smokers who turned on their parents, the Greatest Generation no less? Compared with them, my mother's brother was more than a hero. He was a saint by taking care of his parents their whole lives by living downstairs from them. Reading books might not only turn boys into homos, but they also might learn about faraway places or find out about things and decide to move away.

As close as I was to completing my doctorate, my mother couldn't help herself when she insisted I take the Sanitation Department test. She wanted to stop me before it was too late, before I acquired my Ph.D., and became . . . what? What if it was something less than "a real man"? In her estimation, picking up trash far outweighed picking up *Middlemarch*. For all practical purposes, I understood her reasoning. The unfamiliarity of receiving a higher degree in the humanities distanced her from why I valued it. To me, I wanted to get ahead, or should I say, "a head," at least one better than the one that had been missing a few screws. For her, it all came down to dollars and cents. Getting a doctorate in English made absolutely no sense to her. If nothing else, it seemed highly improbable that some poor schnook growing up in Oakwood Heights who'd been gunned down by a cop could become a professor of English at some forlorn university. Actually, when I enrolled in a doctoral program I wasn't even thinking that far ahead. I just wanted to keep on learning. I had no plans to parlay my education into professional success. Only near completion did it occur to me that I could.

I finally applied to graduate school while teaching high school English, a job I was happy doing. I assumed that by taking graduate classes part-time I'd end up with my doctorate about when my first Social Security check arrived in the mail. Only when state budget cuts forced the school to fire me (which they euphemistically called being "R-I-F'ed," a "reduction in forces") did I take advantage of the opportunity to attend graduate school full-time. But a lot had changed in the university since I'd last been there, especially within English studies, and not for the better in my opinion. Under the theoretical weight of poststructuralism, specifically, and postmodernism, generally, learning had shrunk to its smallest components. Fifteen years earlier students in my undergraduate English program were encouraged to read such sprawling works as Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and Gilbert Highet's *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* to hone their own comprehensive analytical chops. A decade later, in the new theoretical world order, Jacques Derrida and deconstruction were all the rage, and students were celebrated for writing literary analyses focusing on a single word in a text, tracing its unstable meaning and shifting signification. It was all well and good for scholarship (and I enjoy it as a "parlor game") by establishing minutiae as an endless stream of supposedly important esoterica. It thereby creates an infinite supply of finite cultural capital. But what did that have to do with the students I was teaching at various CUNY colleges, the tens of thousands who could barely read and write?

While I was enrolled there, I began earning a less-than-part-time salary as a more-than-full-time adjunct professor. This reinforced my earlier impressions that I had a passion for teaching. And I was pretty darn good at it, too. (I would learn later that that can be a serious impediment in the academy.) After a year at the CUNY Graduate Center I sensed I was staying largely to be as well prepared and as well informed as I could be—for my students. It's why I became interested in Composition and Rhetoric, because of the field's interest in pedagogy, discourse analysis, and literacy, rather than in the narrow specialization that had taken root in the literature program. While I was there, a part of me realized that obtaining a doctorate in the humanities was in fact not the most practical thing to be doing, other than as a means to help others learn. At least that's how I saw it. Had I not seen it that way, I likely would have dropped out. My mother didn't see *any* benefit in what I was doing. According to her, getting a doctorate in English was a *complete* waste of anyone's time. Even now, after all these years, I can't quite bring myself to blame her for

thinking that way. After all, once I was enrolled in the program, we were only quibbling over fractions of its value.

My mother's more general views about the uselessness of books and the futility of pursuing higher education were reinforced by her personal views about me. I had done little to demonstrate I'd benefit from even a college education, let alone from graduate studies. I had squandered my youth academically, compounded by my having put the family through hell by getting shot during a botched holdup. It didn't matter how long ago it had occurred, or how far I'd come academically since then. I was not one of those "gifted" children present in the narratives I'd been reading. The shooting solidified her sense of life's devastating disappointments and the fragile human condition, especially among those she was closest to, like her husband. For her son to have carried out such a terrible act confirmed her suspicions that ours was a fallen world; what was the point of trying to improve it by improving yourself? The world's defects and disgraces began with her spouse and her own flesh and blood. She therefore had little faith in redemption generally and almost none in my chances of improving myself specifically. For her, there were no second acts in life. I was nongifted in my youth and I'd be overstepping my capabilities by enrolling in a doctoral program, going nowhere fast with my doctorate in hand. She probably pictured me becoming a stereotype, the Doctor of Something-or-Other who drives a cab for a living. It didn't matter how far I'd come from almost bleeding to death on the old lady's lawn, doing really well as an undergraduate at Boston University, and all those books I'd read. She thought I should drop out of graduate school to become a Sanitation worker. Even after all this time, I have the same reaction now as I did then: Should I laugh or cry? I might laugh at the absurdity of the notion and cry at its implications. Urging me to take the Sanitation test was her way of "looking out for" me. What she saw, what she was looking at, wasn't enough and wasn't going to be much more.

She'd made that clear to me from the start. For a long time I believed her. I didn't have enough faith in myself to resist. I was still Robin to someone else's Batman. Soon after I was shot I learned about the enormous mess my body was in after taking on three bullets. Nearly all my blood had leaked out. I was in worse condition than some of the sports cars my father drove. As bad as my condition was, medical science saved me. As much as I believed my unawareness of being shot with real bullets, and the epiphany that followed helped, I survived primarily because of the scientific knowledge and nimble skills of the surgeon, Dr. Rose. The mi-

nor miracle that kept me alive amazed me. Sure, nothing short of an actual miracle can save people like the Crypt Keeper and the Mummy, but I was so intrigued by the medical magic Dr. Rose practiced I thought I might one day become a doctor. That would be a clear path toward turning my life around if I could help others turn theirs around.

“*You* want to be a doctor?” my mother replied in total disbelief, as if I had said I wanted to build the world’s first time machine. Her dismissive tone provided the answer to her own question. In case there was any doubt about its unsoundness, there was “the accident” to dangle over my head. “Considering what you just put us through,” she added, “I’m surprised you’d even think of such a thing.” But there was one more nail to put in my coffin. “You have to be smart to be a doctor,” she added, “and you have to be really good in school.” Then there was a pause. Finally, she asked, less stridently, and almost soothingly: “Do you really think it’s for you?” as if she were seeking my opinion. The question at the end of her observations became a pattern throughout my life. It punctuated her resistance to whatever aspirations I had, set up like Plato’s Dialogues wherein Socrates gets to ask all the juicy questions to demonstrate his cleverness and expose the shriveled acumen of others.

But this was no book. Her words struck harder and reached deeper. It was an anti-motivational ground-to-air missile. It often proved lethal, as it did the first time. Once she shot the idea down I never gave it another thought. *She was right*, I concluded. End of story. I could never become a “real doctor.” What was I thinking? In fact, she was convinced I shouldn’t even attend a “real” college. On that I put up some resistance. But it didn’t last. She threw too many obstacles at me. First, she sabotaged my meeting with my high school guidance counselor. When that didn’t completely work, she called in reinforcements, a cousin who was a school principal who convinced me of the brilliancy of going to a junior college to become a court reporter. Before then, though, I continued thinking that my life had been spared (not in any cosmic way, just pure and simple logistics). I wanted to do important things with it, with what I felt was a second chance.

Okay, I thought, *so I can’t be a surgeon and restore people’s fading lives, as my surgeon had done for mine*. But maybe I could be a brilliant scientist or mathematician. The off-the-charts upswing in my academic performance suggested that I could. In the back of my mind I knew I’d acquire a doctorate. I might someday help solve such vexing problems as hunger or more small-ball ones like championing better personal health. It may have been unrealistic to think I could do those things. I might never

have gotten to any of those places, even if my parents had supported me wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, I happened to be in a certain mental place then that might have taken me to those places. I wanted to save the world instead of destroy myself. I didn't tell them that. Maybe I should have, but my mother wasn't even willing to wrap her head around the idea that I wanted to attend college let alone that I wanted to rescue some piece of humankind.

In my senior year I started sending out college applications, all of them in the Northeast and all of them either second- or third-tier schools. I was applying later than most kids. But what did I know? Nobody was helping me fill them out or offering advice. I was on my own, doing it ad hoc and probably with little skill. What I did know was that my overall record in high school wasn't so great, despite the recent upturn. I didn't have a chance of getting into any top-tier school. But I had a plan. First, I'd work my ass off at Anywhere U., just as I had been doing, turn my newly acquired laser beam focus up to maximum setting, and prove my mettle. After my freshman or sophomore year, I'd transfer to a top-tier school. My mother thought otherwise. I wouldn't be going anywhere. Second-, third-, or last-tier four-year colleges weren't in her sights for me. She'd been pleading with me to take New York City's battery of civil service tests, especially the Sanitation one. It was the safest bet. Dealing with garbage was better than dealing with fires and bad guys (like me). Instead of seeing me take those tests, she saw the "Thank you for applying to our school" postcards arriving in the mail.

"Why don't you set up an appointment with your guidance counselor?" she suggested one day. "Maybe he can help you." I thought she meant he could help me decide what college to attend or help me fill out the applications. Only years later did it occur to me that she suggested it for another reason.

"Can I help you?" the Counseling Office's secretary asked when I walked into the main room. She sat at the base of a T-shaped configuration of sprawling offices and rooms, a portal to the dozen or more counselors on staff. My counselor occupied the first office behind her to the right. "I'm here to see Mr. Sorensen," I said.

"You must be ..."

"David. David Borkowski."

She didn't bother looking at any chart or schedule book. She took me at my word, who I was and that I indeed had an appointment with him. "He's with someone right now, but as soon as he's done he'll be right with you."

I sat down and waited my turn. Within minutes, a student walked out of his office, with Mr. Sorensen trailing behind. He stood in the doorway, looking at me and then back at the secretary, waiting for one of us to say something.

“This young man is here to see you,” she said. “He has an appointment.” She didn’t give him my name.

His office was a mess. Folders, papers, files, and books were everywhere, piled on his desk, piled on the floor, and piled on top of filing cabinets and shoved into metal bookcases. It wasn’t surprising. Tottenville High School was enormous. Nearly 5,000 students went there. My graduating class was 1,200. If Mr. Sorensen was responsible for counseling only the students whose last names started from A to E he must have been overworked.

“What can I do for you?” he asked. I immediately launched into my story, how I hadn’t exactly been a model student for a few years but that I’d gotten my act together, starting especially in the second term of my junior year. I hoped it wasn’t too late to get into college, I “asked” rhetorically. “I’m in AP Calculus right now,” I added, “and my math teacher thinks I should take AP Algebra next semester.”

“AP Calculus!” He sat up in his chair and unruffled his tie. “That’s pretty impressive. I bet we’re only offering one. I bet you’re among ten students in the class, tops. Am I right?” I nodded. “Nice,” he said. “Who’s your math teacher?” I told him. “Well, she knows what she’s talking about. If she’s high on you then you must be a good student.” I talked about my plan, to get into a decent school and then apply to a better one.

“That’s a good idea,” he said, “but you should still apply to one or two of those better schools you’re interested in, now. You never know. Maybe your math teacher can write you a letter of recommendation.” He fumbled through the material on his desk. “What’s your name again?” He didn’t remember that he hadn’t been given my name, nor had I introduced myself. I told him. “David. David Borkowski.”

I might as well have said “Charles Manson.” His expression completely changed. He slumped back into his chair, taking his eyes off me completely, and somberly said, “You know, college isn’t for everyone.” *Where did that come from?* I wondered. “Have you considered taking the civil service tests?” he asked. “They make good money. I wish I made as much as them.” I was stunned at the reversal. I don’t remember what I said, if I said anything. I don’t think he said anything more, either. He had given me two pieces of advice, the polar opposites of each other. The first he based on my profile; the second, on my name. Only years later did I realize that my mother had called him in advance, explaining her side of the story

and undermining my own, perhaps even telling him I'd been involved in a robbery. After hearing my name he made the connection of who I really was rather than who I was trying to become.

I left dejected—and less certain of my goal—but not without grabbing off the wall racks a few brochures for what I believed were the weakest colleges in the area. I set my sights even lower, considering what he'd told me, that college wasn't for everyone. But I figured maybe there were some colleges accepting just about anyone, not just the chosen ones. Even a nobody might still have a chance of survival. Hell, it worked for Odysseus.

My father mostly stayed out of the picture. He said little to us and rarely shared his opinions about anything. He seemed doubly reserved among me and my sister at the time because he'd been back for only a couple of years. I imagine he felt more like the way a stepfather might feel in a new household among children not his own. There also was an additional distance between the two of us as a consequence of the shooting. As I learned several years later, he thought that leaving us had led to the robberies, which led to the shooting. *His* guilt silenced him further than the silence he already was predisposed to, virtually stifling whatever influence he might have had concerning the direction of my life when it mattered most. But maybe that's why he waited so long to tell me. It was safer that way.

We were driving back to Staten Island from a golf outing in New Jersey when he brought it up. I had recently enrolled in graduate school, so it was more than fifteen years since the shooting. For all I know, he might have been looking for years for the "right" time to raise his concern. Then again, this was the same man who had advised me days after being shot not to talk about it, ever. No wonder it took him so long. He wasn't in the habit of expressing himself, especially when it came to that subject. Not surprisingly, he did so in a roundabout way. At first, I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Does it bother you to swing a golf club?" he awkwardly began.

"Bother me? No. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I was just asking." He had to slow down as the traffic slowed ahead. We hadn't timed the day well. We were returning in the middle of rush hour and as we approached the exit for the Outerbridge it began to look like a parking lot. "I guess I was asking," he resumed as the car came to a standstill, "if, well, you know, if there's any lingering pain or discomfort making that kind of motion, twisting your body like that, you know, still, after the accident?"

"You mean *after being shot*?" I asked, in the most weightless, matter-of-fact

tone possible. "You can say it, Dad: 'After being shot.' It wasn't an *accident*. It didn't just happen."

"No, of course not." There was an uncomfortable pause. "Speaking of which, sometimes I blame myself."

"What? Really? For what?"

"Well, yes. I blame myself for, you know, for you being shot. That maybe you did it because of the separation, the robberies and all. That maybe if I was there it wouldn't have happened."

"I can't answer that," I said. "Maybe it had something to do with it; then again, maybe not. A large part of me thinks that whether or not you were there I still would have done it."

I'm sure that didn't sound reassuring to him. If anything, it must have seemed I was suggesting that his presence would have provided as much guidance as his absence. I didn't mean it that way, not entirely. From the moment it happened, and for the rest of my life, I never blamed anyone other than myself for it. It had to be that way. I *needed* to take full responsibility for bringing myself to that "bad" place in order to be accountable for taking myself out of it and heading toward a better one. I had to accept all of it to fully recover, to find redemption, however privatized it had become.

Whether his presence during my childhood would have altered anything was irrelevant to *me*. If he needed to come clean about how he felt, it might have been better if he'd done so sooner. If anything, I may have found fault with his behavior *after* he'd come back into our lives. He had physically returned to us, but he stood in the shadows. He said virtually nothing to me about anything significant, except to advise me to keep quiet about having been shot. He had given me the impression that important subjects weren't to be discussed, by either of us. Whether he expected me to go to college or not, he never said. My mother did all the talking, and strategizing. She held strong opinions about my future, and she zealously expressed them.

When I said I was thinking of becoming a doctor, my mother clearly thought it was one of the most ridiculous things she had ever heard. She wasn't prepared to send me to even a four-year school, let alone somewhere where I would enroll in a pre-med program. When she quashed my idea of becoming a doctor, I removed it so fast and so far from my mind that only now, writing about those days, do I recall the exchange. What she most wanted me to do was take as many civil service tests as possible and become a train conductor or a sanitation worker. It's funny

that she never completely abandoned her dream, right up to the time I was obtaining my Ph.D.

But I wasn't signing up to take those civil service tests. Instead, I was filling out college applications. As much as she disapproved of my going to college, she liked the possible "going away" part, my being at a safer distance from Dougie and other bad influences that had led to the "accident." But sending me to a four-year college wasn't worth that. As I continued to fill out college applications, even after I'd talked to my guidance counselor, she grew increasingly worried. If Mr. Sorensen couldn't stop me, and neither could she, then she'd have to wage a two-front war. Sure enough, she sent for backup, now someone who'd try to sell me something other than civil service tests. The romance and practicality of attending a trade school or a community college appeared on the scene, including one in particular that would require me to live away. If I wanted to leave Staten Island so much, finding such a school could only enhance the scheme, making it easier for me to accept it and therefore drop my own plan. A cousin was summoned to "advise" me. But as had been the case with my meeting with the guidance counselor, the advice he offered had been prearranged.

In truth, my mother probably overreacted to my chances of getting into those four-year colleges, especially without anyone's help. Sure, I had a plan, but I didn't know how to execute it properly. Also, much of my crappy academic past wasn't far behind, casting a shadow on whatever very recent progress I had made. Furthermore, I'd bombed the SAT. My scores were abysmal. I didn't take the PSAT in my junior year because I was recovering from gunshot wounds when it was first administered, and I was too ignorant about it overall to know what it was. I was so nervous taking the SAT I might as well have been drunk. I was unaware that it could be taken more than once. I thought it was like all tests, a one-time-only deal. Nobody suggested I try again. My SAT scores only confirmed what my family already knew and what my counselor had advised: College wasn't for everyone. And it wasn't for me.

I probably made a mess out of the applications too. Not knowing any better, I may as well have filled them out in crayon in my attempt to make them more colorful. I didn't know how to type, so in my nearly illegible handwriting I submitted a personal statement that was undoubtedly riddled with mistakes and likely incoherent. Most of the schools rejected me, but a couple didn't, probably the ones with near-open admissions policies, the schools I hurriedly applied to after visiting my guidance

counselor. Which ones accepted me, I don’t remember. Once I’d been persuaded not to attend any of them and apply to Johnson & Wales Junior College to learn to become a court reporter, I stopped caring one way or the other. I think I threw out the last couple of responses without even opening them, something I’d repeat when I was offered scholarships to graduate school six years later.

My cousin-in-law John was married to my oldest cousin, Ann-Marie, on my mother’s side. John and Ann-Marie were nearly as old as my parents. John had risen through the ranks of the public school system, first as a gym teacher, eventually reaching as high as superintendent. While teaching gym, he had worked evenings and weekends on his Ed.D. He was the most educated member on both sides of our family. In addition, during my parents’ separation John had taken a personal interest in my well-being at our frequent family gatherings. For anyone unfamiliar with Italian American families, “frequent” is an understatement. Not only did we have family barbecues on Memorial Day, July 4th, and Labor Day, but if there was any food left over (and there always was) we would get together the following day and finish it. Religious celebrations rivaled the Vatican’s pageantry, and we consumed as much food and drink as Rome. We even celebrated St. Patrick’s Day. If there had been some way to work in roasting a groundhog, we would have celebrated that day too. Any excuse was found to bring the family together, to eat for eight to ten hours. On such occasions, John made it a point to play with me, tossing a football around or playing an improvised game of handball within a chalked-out miniature tennis rectangle. They were generous gestures, and not anomalies by any means; I welcomed them and appreciated him for it. Between his degrees and his closeness to me, my mother saw him as an ideal ally in her campaign to prevent me from attending a four-year school.

One Saturday evening during the winter of my senior year, she invited him over for dinner. My sister was out preparing for her upcoming wedding, auditioning bands. While I’m sure my father was present, I can’t picture him there. I clearly remember John and my mother, though. They did all the talking.

As if it were last Saturday, not more than thirty years ago, I vividly remember the preparations and what my mother cooked. She treated it as if it were a holiday. To her, it was a special event. To me, it seemed like the end of my dream. For everyone, it was a blueprint for the future. She served roast beef, mashed potatoes, and stringbeans. We all drenched the meat and potatoes with the thick gravy poured from a white ceramic watering pitcher we passed back and forth. Dinner conversation involved the

usual topics about favorite TV shows, popular movies, and family gossip. When she served dessert—apple pie à la mode—my mother introduced John as if he were a public speaker. “Well, you know why I invited John here, to discuss your plans,” she said, nodding at me, “and where you might go to school. He has a couple of ideas in mind. So, why don’t we turn it over to him: John?”

He had only one thing on his mind, not “a couple of ideas.” John was well aware that I wanted to leave Staten Island, along with the benefits of ridding me of the people, places, and things interfering with my “rehabilitation,” as the recovering substance abusers I’d teach years later would say. He must have felt he’d found the perfect solution. He handed me a brochure from a two-year college in Providence, Rhode Island, that specialized in culinary arts and had a business school. Within the business school, a number of associate degrees were offered in accounting, finance, and management. He and my mom must have agreed that such subjects were too difficult for me to handle, or that I wouldn’t bite at someday managing a food franchise. Instead, they settled on a program that was, not coincidentally, the most “hands-on” degree available, short of becoming a cook if I enrolled in the culinary school. He pointed to a section on the brochure that touted the benefits of majoring in court reporting. It was a rare white-collar skill to master. I’d be working with my hands, but they’d remain clean—no dirt under my fingernails. I wouldn’t be embarrassed, like Pip in *Great Expectations*. I’d be a “respectable” member of the middle class. It wasn’t working-class work. (“They make good money!” John and my mother euphorically reminded me several times throughout dessert.) Everything about it was a plus. “Providence would be a great location to go to school,” he declared. “You’d have a lot of fun there,” he added, making it sound more exciting and exotic than the run-down industrial city it was back then.

I examined the brochure. There were a few sentences pitching the advantages of becoming a court reporter: taking dictation during important corporate meetings, playing a significant role in important court cases, and working with some of the most powerful people in the country. Like John’s remarks about Providence, the brochure made it seem more glamorous and interesting than the tedious, intellectually dreary work it actually was. Nothing about it appealed to me, except the opportunity to leave Staten Island. As if I were a boy back in Andrew’s room daydreaming, or sitting in my grandmother’s kitchen, I stared out the window. I imagined myself sneaking into Providence College or Brown University and hiding in the back of a classroom—acquiring some kind of covert

education there. After I arrived at Johnson & Wales that vision never left me. I often walked alone through Brown’s leafy campus wondering what it would be like to be a “real” student.

My mother went to the kitchen to put the softening ice cream away and returned with a pot of coffee. She poured three cups and passed them around. She was using the “good china,” as she liked to say, so the cups rattled a bit on the saucers they rested on because she was nervously unaccustomed to using them. I wasn’t drinking coffee then so I had a glass of milk. I pretended to be studying the brochure carefully. I felt trapped. When I looked up, the two of them were staring at me, smiling, pleased with themselves for the clever way they had handled the situation. My father said next to nothing the entire time. Like the day I learned he was leaving us, his head and eyes were buried in his lap.

“You know, Aunt Julia,” John began, “this coffee is a little too hot for me. Could I please have an ice cube? That’ll cool it off.”

“Why, sure, John,” my mother said, getting up. She could practically stretch her hand out and reach into the refrigerator from her dining room seat. “I’m so sorry,” she continued, returning and carrying several ice cubes in a small dish. “I guess I should have let it cool first.”

“Oh, no, it’s perfectly fine. I’m just not a fan of really hot coffee,” John informed us, scanning the room. “Let’s make a bet,” he said, plopping a cube into his coffee, “to see how long it will take for this to dissolve.” He looked at his watch and pronounced his prediction. The rest of us played along. Of course John had the correct time. He probably had done it before. It was a calculated experiment with a predictable outcome. Maybe that’s how he viewed suggesting court reporting to me. He meant well, but it was exhausting enough enduring my mother’s low expectations of me. John’s presence and impact had squared it. Once the ice cube melted I couldn’t help but see it as representing my own dissolving desire to become formally educated.

Despite my recent academic accomplishments and my epiphany, I didn’t have the wherewithal or the guts to fall back on myself. I continued to rack up other academic victories that demonstrated I had come a long way from the stickup. In addition to spending a semester in AP Calculus, I scored a 91 on the state’s Physics Regents exam, a feat likely shared by a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands, if not millions, who’ve taken it over the decades. That happened at the end of my senior year. By then it probably was too late to prove anything further to anyone, if it would have even mattered anyway. My bags already were packed before that test was administered. I was heading to Providence to become a court

reporter. Similar to how I purged any ideas of becoming a doctor, I rid myself forever of studying math or science. Even when I was accepted into Boston University two years later, neither subject occurred to me as study options. I had moved on, and I did so as swiftly as when I abandoned a career in medical science.

When my AP Calculus teacher asked me why I would be dropping that subject in the spring and not enrolling in AP Algebra to prepare for the exam, as she advised, I casually told her I would be taking typing and stenography instead.

“Why are you doing that?” she asked with alarm.

“I’ve decided to become a court reporter,” I proudly explained, sounding as if I were fulfilling a lifelong dream.

“Really?” she said, more surprised than alarmed.

“Oh, yeah, it’s a good career, and it’s what I want to do,” I assured her. I said the words with such conviction they further convinced *me* of what a great idea it was. No sooner had the idea been planted in my head than I’d started believing in its soundness.

“Well, okay,” she said, “if that’s what you want to do.”

It was, I told her, it definitely was.

I hated Johnson & Wales. I sat in typing classes and learned how to decode the court reporting machine’s Byzantine system, when what I most wanted to be doing was studying Aristotle or taking Organic Chemistry. Whenever I came across a relatively challenging course or project, I sank my teeth into it like a pitbull, such as the compulsory business law course. One of its requirements involved summarizing a prominent court case. I decided that wasn’t enough. I spent hours inside the state’s Supreme Court library researching the landmark affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. When the instructor returned it, he had written at the bottom of the last page only “Please see me.” There was no grade.

“You wrote this?” he asked.

“Well, yes. Of course I did. Why?”

“I can see it’s in your own words. The writing, quite honestly, is very unpolished and weak in a few spots, but you could have rewritten an article to make it appear your own.”

I didn’t know what he was getting at. “Plagiarism” probably wasn’t part of my vocabulary at the time, and it never would have occurred to me to skip the process of learning about the subject by piggy-backing on someone else’s accomplishment. When I was a helplessly indifferent student I wouldn’t even have bothered trying to figure out how to plagiarize a

writing assignment. I was quite comfortable either doing it half-assed or not doing it at all.

“I didn’t rewrite any articles,” I said. “I read a bunch of law books, if that’s what you mean. The stuff I pulled directly from them I underlined,” I added. I didn’t know how to properly cite from other sources because I’d never written a research paper before. I assumed that a law paper required some special treatment, so that’s what I’d given it. “Look, I did a lot of work on this,” I said, as I pulled a notebook from a cluster of books I was carrying in a small canvas duffle bag. “Here are my notes.”

He thumbed through the notebook’s pages, pausing once in a while to read over the material. Nearly the entire book was filled with details about the case and material dealing with affirmative action, college admissions policies, discrimination, and quotas.

“You didn’t supply a bibliography and you didn’t cite the material properly. More than anything, you didn’t need to do all of this; so, I’m sorry, but I thought maybe you didn’t do it. I guess the real question, then, is why would you? You didn’t need to go through all of this trouble.”

“I wanted to. It seemed interesting.”

He looked at me strangely. “Again, the writing has its flaws, but other than that it’s almost as good as what my law students do.” We stared at each other for a couple of seconds, the encounter growing increasingly uncomfortable. I didn’t know what else to say. “What are you doing here?” he finally asked, breaking the silence. “I mean, at this school.” I knew what he meant, but I still didn’t know what to say. What was I supposed to tell him, “My mother made me”? He might have thought I was joking and laughed. Really, though, if I told him the real reason why I was there I might have broken down in tears right then and there, having to listen to those words come out of my mouth. Talking isn’t always a cure.

I did my time at Johnson & Wales. For me, at least, the most intellectually rewarding experience occurred outside of school. That experience also influenced my decision to get a well-rounded liberal arts education when I attended Boston University, as did the influence of my girlfriend’s family (but that’s truly a whole other story).

At the beginning of my first semester at Johnson & Wales, I stumbled across a beat-up hardbound copy of Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book*. I spotted it sitting on a “Free Books” portable book rack in the Providence Public Library. Finding the city’s public library was one of the first things I did when I arrived. After taking the book back to my dorm, where I hid it under my clothes in the dresser, I avidly began reading the “Great Books”

listed in the back pages of Adler’s manual. I wasn’t entirely antisocial at the school by any means. I attended my fair share of dorm parties and took my fair share of hits from the bong. They grew like weeds in every dorm room. Most of the time we played cards or backgammon while listening to Led Zeppelin or to Peter Frampton’s *Live* album. On some nights a person didn’t need a bong to get high. You could simply inhale the smoky air and get a buzz while playing blackjack.

I managed to sneak off frequently to read *The Odyssey* or Xenophon’s *Anabasis* once I discovered Adler’s list. I decided it wasn’t enough to read only the Greek classics he listed, or the two or three “especially” plays by the Greek playwrights he recommended. I read all the extant ones available and whatever else I could find written during that era. I did, however, heed Adler’s advice to have a “conversation” with the texts by underlining passages and writing responses along the margins. I still have many of those texts. In reading the margin notes now I must admit I’m rather pleased with myself. Several keen insights survive, in a sloppy handwriting that doesn’t seem to be my own. I wasn’t quite as insipid as my family thought I was.

I wasted two years at a school that was barren of the intellectual stimulation I craved. Its library was as small as my bedroom back home and it contained only business books. I knew plenty of wonderful people there, but no one was serious about learning anything serious: Get the two-year degree in finance and get the hell out. That was fine for them, but not for me. I wanted something else, something more. I felt the same way about becoming a fireman or a sanitation worker. It wasn’t what I wanted to do. Don’t get me wrong. Such work is honorable and important. I’ve never once believed that my books or my advanced degrees make me better than friends and family who did become firemen or elevator repair mechanics. In our celebrity culture, we mourn the deaths of unimportant people in our lives who really don’t matter much to us, like Lady Diana or Michael Jackson, whereas the truly important ones, the people who keep our streets safe and clean, go largely unrecognized (until politicians want their vote). I never felt disdain for any of my classmates at Johnson & Wales. Nor did it ever occur to me that I was better than they because I was reading Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and they weren’t. Being bookish doesn’t automatically confer moral or social superiority on a person, or even intelligence for that matter (knowledge, yes). Hemingway was one of the most widely read men of his day but that didn’t stop him from beating the shit out of his wives or blowing his brains out with a shotgun. Many

Nazis were thumbing through the pages of Goethe and Schiller, while listening to Bach and Brahms, as they turned up the gas on their victims. Books can do as much harm as good.

But in all honesty, most of my schoolmates at Johnson & Wales were as suspicious of books and “education” as the Staten Island kids I’d grown up with and my family. They memorized their textbooks for exams and forgot the material as quickly as possible to prepare for the next one. But I never faulted them for that, just as I don’t fault my own students now. Over time, what I began to question was a school system that largely used books as a gauge while simultaneously touting their value as a way to get ahead materially. Both ultimately diminish their real value as a way to advance literacy. In many classrooms, books are agents of social discipline rather than agents of personal liberation. The biggest lesson many people who pass through our educational institutions learn is realizing how uninterested they are in the very subjects they are being taught. My classmates at Johnson & Wales were all bright, decent kids, but they were typical of the “average student” who consumes knowledge and learning according to how the typical factory school system produces it. They were by-products of an intellectually dispassionate environment, as was I. Johnson & Wales existed to turn out worker bees, not thoughtful citizens, as do many institutions of so-called higher learning. Perhaps that’s why what I most remember about the place were the things I learned outside of school, the joy and satisfaction of reading Thucydides and Sophocles while moving around Adler’s list.

I received an Associate Degree from Johnson & Wales in court reporting. I learned to type as fast as 280 words per minute on the steno machine. I could have started working in the field immediately, earning more back then, twenty-five years ago, than I’m earning as a college professor now. But I couldn’t imagine myself sitting in a courtroom listening to testimony or squirming in a boardroom listening to depositions. I never practiced court reporting professionally. I foresaw this as soon as I began studying it. But I decided to complete the program because I didn’t want to go down in flames as a quitter. More important, I believed if I stuck it out I could shake my family off of my back and enroll in a more earnest academic program.

Once again, I filled out college applications. This time, though, I could type. And this time I didn’t tell my family. Only my girlfriend knew. Because I wanted to stay near her, I applied strictly to colleges in Boston. Tufts University and Boston College rejected me; Boston University accepted me “on probation.” I had to maintain a 2.5 GPA my first semester,

which I did easily. I wouldn't say my parents were upset I had abandoned court reporting to attend BU, more like in shock. For years thereafter my mother often asked why I didn't dust off the machine and earn some real money. She did this even while suggesting I take the Sanitation Department test as I was preparing to complete my doctorate. I guess I could've combined the two skills and taken minutes during all the trash talk. Once I declared my major after one semester at BU, English, and minor, history, my parents went from shock to batshit, especially my mother. She and my sister repeatedly urged me to switch my major to something more practical, like business administration. For three and a half years I kept hearing the same stereophonic tune. There were additional refrains. "You could at least take some computer science or business courses," they'd both say, as if a couple of computer science classes would secure a position in the field. Really, they didn't know what they were talking about. But here's the thing: I listened to them. I'd take such courses, resent being in them, and not do well in them. (Okay, sure, possible passive/aggressive behavior at play, but I was also uninterested and bored.) In all my other courses, including a couple of graduate courses I'd slipped into, I was receiving A's, with an occasional B+.

In such courses I *had* become a gifted student. I shone in class, less lustrous in my writing at first, although I did better at compiling heavy-handed research papers for my history classes than I did writing standard literary essays for my English classes. I must have sparkled enough in all of them because at least two of my professors, without any solicitation on my part, contacted colleagues at three different graduate programs about me. One was in history. All three not only invited me to enroll in their programs, they also all offered me scholarships. It was better late than never, as the cliché goes. True, the scholarships came six or seven years after most working-class academics were offered theirs, but I was six or seven years behind them intellectually so I didn't mind. To me, the invitations and scholarships demonstrated how far I'd come, no matter how late they had arrived. I felt liberated. But not from the working class, or from my working-class family: I finally felt free of that jerk carrying a water pistol that rainy October night.

I hadn't been gifted in my youth, but there I was being offered the same prize as those who were. By fudging the years, I might begin to see myself in all those working-class academic narratives I'd been devouring. Even if my Aunt Mary was right, that I was only turning into a fake doctor, I had become a "Scholarship Boy." In the tradition of the narratives, I'd be undergoing the most significant chapter in a bootstrapper's journey,

except for one significant detail. I let my family and my girlfriend, Madeleine, talk me out of pursuing those programs and scholarships. Within months, I’d broken up with her, a woman I’d dated for five years and whom I’d planned on marrying. I didn’t realize it then, but I must have been subconsciously resentful that *she* hadn’t at least supported me. Her I could get rid of. Family is different. I didn’t accept the scholarships and go to graduate school at that time. Given the chance, I turned down the opportunity to cast myself in the classic role established in nearly every working-class academic story. I didn’t become a Scholarship Boy, just as I didn’t become a doctor, or a scientist, or a legal scholar, a prospect opened up to me at Boston University by a man who had argued cases before the Supreme Court. Similar to all those other opportunities, I heeded the unsound advice of my parents. I turned it down and did nothing.

After being shot I became, like Odysseus, “the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course.” After receiving his wound, it took him ten years to return home. It took me a little longer after receiving mine, finding a home in the classroom. If I had become a Scholarship Boy, starting out all the way back to when my math teacher had implored me to take AP Algebra, I might not have found that home. All those setbacks made me who I am; not a Scholarship Boy but a Teacher Man.