

I accept my diploma and let the provost strap the pointy blue-and-silver party hat onto my head, then wave at the crowd assembled before the gleaming white facade of m-cy*s University. The audience is mostly made up of first and second floor families, but I glance up to where the atrium opens to all the floors above. Residents of the Commons from all levels peer down. I spot my five-year-old neighbor hanging his oversized head over the glass banister. I wave at him too, acknowledging that he's a part of this ceremony also, that in my being on this stage there is possibility for anyone to improve their situation in life. He smiles at me, then opens his toothless mouth and lets a glob of spit fall three stories to the glossy floor below. Then he pulls his head back and I lose sight of him.

My father finds me after the ceremony and claps me on the shoulder, the only emotional display a man of his manliness can muster. He never had the opportunity to go to school like I have. He tells me, "The sky's the limit for you now, m'boy!"

The old timey saying doesn't mean much now that the smog ceiling hovers low outside the fishbowl window at the far end of the Commons, but I know he's telling me he's proud, so I clap him back and mutter, "Thanks."

I trade congratulations with my classmates. They insist they'll keep in touch. I say, "You know where to find me!" They laugh too hard. We make our way en masse to the Escalator, which has been turned on for the occasion. Most of the other families get off at the second floor. Pa and I take the Escalator to the top. The last length has not been turned on. We move the yellow plastic barriers out of the way, carefully avoiding the circular saws strapped on top, and I help Pa up the oversized stairs. My party hat wilts as the air grows hotter and hazier.

The top landing is crowded with sweating bodies. A few are waiting there to welcome me back. Barbara, an older woman who became a mother to all the children on the lane after her own son's insides melted, presses a box into my hands. "Congratulations," she whispers. She coughs and blood mists my hands. Inside the box are drywall cookies. Barbara's were the best. She snuck softened pats of old chapstick into the batter to give the crumbly plaster some flavor.

I gingerly lift one out and place it whole in my mouth. Instantly I am transported back to childhood, the chalky lump tasting faintly of bubblegum, my cheeks sucked dry and my throat struggling to swallow. I wonder how my stomach, grown soft on the canned goods offered by the first floor storerooms, will handle this bite of nostalgia later. I thank her with a smile and she squeezes my hand. "I'm glad you still like them," she says.

We pass others I recognize, but many of the folks crowding the wide walkway are strangers. We squeeze along the lane of storefront apartments until we come to ours. These spaces sell for an arm and a leg now -- some first floorers like fresh meat occasionally -- but when Pa and Ma arrived twenty years ago they were able to snap up a space simply by occupying it. Ours is small, but one of the most colorful on our floor. The walls are painted with green striated diamonds my father calls leaves and the floor is a dappled brown and gold pattern that my father calls wood. It used to be a display room for clothing. Now it is where Pa eats and sleeps and stares at his hands when he doesn't have to be at work. I'm impressed he's kept others from occupying it while both Ma and me have been gone.

A celebratory cricket cobbler is waiting for us, baked on a hot tile by the outer wall where Pa placed it before the ceremony. The chitinous aroma sets my mouth watering. As Pa scoops out two portions onto black tupperplates, I say, "There are so many more residents here than I remember."

"The East Wing's been scavenged to its skeleton. Light started showing through the outer walls. So of course its residents couldn't stay there, had to move over here. Like we have space! And they've brought contamination with them. The lane just smells like ozone since they've arrived."

"Hey, now. Think the hole in the outer walls has anything to do with that?"

Pa snorts. "I know I'm not supposed to say things like that, but it's just a fact that people carry contamination. It doesn't make them bad people, just dirty. I hope the Commons figures out a better solution than dropping them at our front door."

He hands me my plate and slaps me on the shoulder. "But that's what you went to university for, right? So you can take over the Commons Expansion Project and save us all!"

"I'm not sure that's exactly true."

"Don't be so bashful, son. You're a graduate now. Doors are gonna open for you. So, I'm eager to hear: what next?"

"I'm not really sure, Pa."

"Well, of course you'll be working with the Expansion. I already know that. But what departments have you applied to?"

He looks at me with his good eye so expectantly that I'm embarrassed to tell him.

"I applied to the Safety Operations Team. I told them my final research project included Death Prevention in the case of outside exposure -- exactly what their job posting said they needed."

"Excellent! When do you start?"

I swallow a mouthful of cobbler. "I don't."

"What?"

"They asked what my research had found about going outside. I said the resounding conclusion was to not. They said they really wished I had said something different. Then they said my references were impressive and if I had just two more years' experience I'd be perfect for the job."

"But you just graduated. You just completed two years of work, of research, of training for this exact task. Doesn't that count as experience?"

"Apparently not. They wanted hands-on Expansion Project experience."

"But the Expansion Project hasn't started yet."

"That's what I said. The interviewer said excuses won't get me very far. He then suggested I re-enroll at m-cy*s and get upper level credits."

"But you just graduated," Pa repeats. "That doesn't count as experience?"

“Not to them.”

“Upper level credits. What would that cost? Another six years for your mother?”

“I told him that wasn’t an option. He just shrugged and said that plenty of second floor candidates are willing to re-enroll.”

“What an idiot. Most hiring people are. They check their little boxes off and push people around, but they don’t know anything. You don’t want to work for someone like that. What other openings are there with the Expansion?”

“There was a communications role --”

“Sounds like sissy work.”

“-- and a project coordinator position.”

“That’s more like it!”

“I didn’t hear back on either one.”

“That’s not a no. You need to follow up, show initiative. Back in my day, if you didn’t follow up, you didn’t really care.”

“I remembered you used to say that. So I did follow up.”

“Attaboy!”

“I sent them a polite reminder that I had applied a few weeks ago and asked if they knew when they would be getting back to interested applicants.”

“Did they respond?”

“Turns out you’re not supposed to bother them.”

“Ha! They’re playing hard to get. I’m sure you impressed them.”

“I don’t think so. They replied with a photo of my application on fire in a trashcan.”

“They did what?”

“And a note that said they had received many qualified applicants so while they wished they could give a smiley face sticker to each one, they just didn’t have the time.”

“I can’t believe....”

“Wished me all the best in my future ventures, though.”

“You must have struck the wrong tone, come off as pushy.”

“I don’t imagine how I could have.”

“Come on, son, these are professionals you’re talking about. They don’t start trash can fires for no reason. You must’ve done something to annoy them.”

“Sure. Must have.”

“Okay, fine. I believe you. So those are no-go’s. Where else have you applied? There must be other options.”

“Actually, no.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Those were it. Most of the other openings have already gone to first floor kids with parents on the E.P. committee. I’m keeping my eyes open, though.”

“The E.P. is the largest project the Commons have ever undergone. They promised dozens of jobs around it.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Pa. The jobs don’t exist. I guess there isn’t going to be as much E as they promised.”

Pa looks like he wants to argue, but what’s he going to say? I’m the one who’s spent the last two years downstairs. I’m the one who knows how the first floor works.

“Okay. So you think you’ve exhausted your options with the Expansion. No worries. You have a degree now, good as anybody else’s. You can get a job elsewhere in the Commons, where folks have gotten jobs before.”

He’s trying hard to sustain his enthusiasm. I don’t want to let him down. I can’t lie to him, either. I *had* interviewed with the Status Quo Data Collection department. Looked like an easy job: surveying residents on how they like the options in the food court, if they think the Commons AC should be turned down, whether they’d join an underclass coup to overthrow the storeroom owners -- yes-no questions, stuff like that. Pa leans forward as I describe the role.

“Getting the interview is the hardest part. You’re already halfway there. You did what I told you? Firm handshake, steady eye contact, three-sentence anecdotes?”

“I did. They didn’t like any of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“First of all, nobody shakes hands anymore. Remember that strain of flesh-eating bacteria that got loose from the third floor bathroom pipe? So when I reached out to shake his hand, the recruiter jumped back like I was trying to kill him.”

“An oversight on my part. Go on.”

“Then when I tried to keep eye contact, he asked if I had a problem with authority. Seems they prefer their newbies to keep their eyes down and kind of grovel. I tried to be relatable and say, “Well, this one time--” but it was no use. The interview was already over. They said I didn’t fit their workplace culture.”

“Those would have been power moves back in the day. When I was thirteen I went right up to the owner of a hardware store, stuck out my hand and said, ‘I’m your next stockroom boy and I ain’t taking no for an answer.’ That showed gumption! Landed me my first job -- and several more after.”

“Different times, Pa. Now it’s all about showing deference and obedience. And social distancing.”

“Alright, so you blew one interview. Anything in the other departments?”

“Lower level Food Supply is looking for an Outventory Supervisor.”

“That sounds prestigious. And it gets you down to the first floor, where you can start rubbing elbows -- from a distance -- with those who can really change your life.”

“It’s storeroom work. Staying close by, keeping an eye on the supply, making sure nothing goes missing. Occasionally counting the boxes.”

“Don’t discount it, son. You’ll be well positioned to make connections. You never know when the opportunity to impress someone important might arise.”

"I don't know, Pa. It doesn't pay very well."

"What's it pay?"

"Can of beans every two weeks."

"That's nothing to turn your nose up at. With prudent rationing, a single can of beans can last days."

"But what do I eat the second week?"

"You might have to catch a few roaches. But I didn't raise you to be too good for the occasional bug. Not every meal can be canned goods, you know."

"Even so, it felt a little sparse. I told them I could only do it for twice as much."

"What? Must be that fancy college rubbing off on you. You can't expect the world to just give you things, son. You have to put your time in, prove your worth -- *then* you can ask for that second can of beans."

"Pa, I know you think I'm being entitled. But it didn't feel right to accept such a low offer -- especially because I know what you and Ma have tried to give me."

Pa leans back and sucks his tooth. "So that's it? Two years down the drain, your poor mother gone, and all you can say is you can't find a job because you refuse to work for beans?"

I hesitate. "I did get offered one position."

"You did? Well, of course you did! Of course you did -- and here you've been putting me on! Really, you shouldn't be so rude to your old man. Where?"

"Energy."

"Energy had an opening? That's quite exciting! What was the role?"

"Running."

"A directorship? That's incredible!"

"No, running -- running the generators. Running *on* the generators. They're looking for leg men."

Pa looks bewildered.

“Running the generators? That’s grunt work. No, that’s too much. What did you get an education for if they’re just going to have you run the energy treadmill? You should be working on Design, or at least Maintenance.”

“At least the pay’s decent. Boxes a week.”

“They can afford to pay that because their workers drop like flies.”

“They said I’d be up for advancement in six months if I ran well.”

“If you ran the way they wanted, you’d be dead in two. I know guys who wore their legs down to stumps trying to keep up with the foreman’s pace. Now they use twice as much power driving themselves around in those ancient plug-in chairs.”

“They at least offered me the job. You don’t think I should take it?”

“No! Energy running makes Sanitation look like a dream job. You’d be better off joining me in the trash chute.”

“That’s where I’ll apply next, then.”

“Son--” Pa gazes at me with his watery blue eyes, tinged yellow in the corners. The clammy domes of his tumors are marbled red and white. “Look at me. You don’t want to work in Sanitation.”

“It’s not so bad, Pa. I’d like to work with you. We’d get to go to work together every day.”

“I don’t want you to work with me.”

“What’s wrong with working with you?”

“It’s meaningless, son. I breathe in crap all day. My body’s breaking down. I come home covered in everybody else’s waste. We’re treated like trash by even those degenerate East-wingers.”

“Meaningless? Pa -- yours is the most important job in the Commons! What’s more meaningful than taking care of everybody and getting rid of the stuff that makes us sick? At your own risk, too! I’d be proud to work with you. As far as I’m concerned, you and your team are heroes.”

His eyes water even more as I tell him this, but he shakes his head. "That's sweet but that's not what I'm talking about. It's a crap job. It's not what I want for you -- what we wanted for you. Your Ma didn't give her life so that you could join me in the dumpster."

"She's not dead, Pa."

"But she'll never be the same. Do you know how being a first floor Bathroom Attendant changes a person?"

"Doesn't she just stand there and hand out wet wipes?"

"The wipes ran out years ago. Now she's required to-- But that's not even the worst part. During her 12-hour Off last year, she told me there's been a mutation among the lower levels. Keeps them from releasing their bowels unless somebody claps."

"So she has to-- ?"

"Clap! Every time a first floorer goes in to relieve themselves, she has to give them a standing ovation. Keep it going till they're done. A person doesn't come back from that, son."

"Pa, I'm sorry. I know she's there because of me. I know you wanted more for me. But the jobs just aren't there."

"So you keep saying. But the Commons committee said--"

"Look, I don't know. I don't know! I know I don't know everything. But I'd be so bold as to say that maybe they lied."

"Shh!" Pa glances over his shoulder at the glass-lined entranceway to our storefront abode. No one is passing by. He hisses nonetheless, "You'll embarrass yourself, and me, with those sorts of accusations!"

"Sorry. You're right. It's a personal problem. Me. I'm the problem. I can't find work and it's my own damn fault."

"That's..."

Pa sighs and leans back in his chair. His cobbler is forgotten as he rubs his face vigorously with both hands.

“I didn’t mean for that to sound like an accusation. I’m sure you’re trying your best.”

“Thanks, Pa.”

He stands up and clears our tupperplates from the table. “But you need to try harder. Making excuses won’t get you very far.”

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