

Lost in the Meritocracy

HOW I TRADED AN EDUCATION FOR A TICKET TO THE RULING CLASS

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On the bus ride down to St. Paul to take the test that will help determine who will get ahead in life, who will stay put, and who will fall behind, two of my closest buddies seal their fates by opening pint bottles of cherry schnapps the moment we leave the high school parking lot. They hide the liquor under their varsity jackets and monitor the driver's rearview mirror for opportune moments to duck their heads and swig. A girl sees what they're up to, mutters, "Morons," and goes back to shading in the tiny ovals in her Scholastic Aptitude Test review book. She dated one of the guys a few months back, but lately she's grown serious, ambitious; I've heard that she hopes to practice law someday and prosecute companies that pollute the air. When she notices one of the bottles coming my way, she shoots me a look of horror.

"No, thanks," I say.

My friends seem wounded by this—aren't we teammates? We play baseball and football together. We go way back. In our high school class there are only fifteen boys, and every summer some of us camp out by the river and cannonball from the cliffs into the current. We talk as though we'll be together forever, though I've always known better: Someday we'll be ranked. Someday we'll be screened and then separated. I've known this since my first day of kindergarten, when I raised

my hand slightly faster than the other kids—and waved it around to make sure the teacher saw it.

My buddies give me another chance to drink.

"Put that away, guys. Today is a big deal for us."

But they know this already—they just don't like the fact.

"Come on," one says. "A sip."

"I'm sorry. No."

And so I go on to college, and they don't.

Percentile is destiny in America. Four years after that bus ride I'm slumped on an old sofa in the library of my Princeton eating club, waiting to feel the effects of a black capsule that someone said would help me finish writing my overdue application for a Rhodes scholarship. At the other end of the sofa sits my good friend Adam (all names in this piece have been changed)—a Jewish science whiz from the New York suburbs who ate magic mushrooms one evening, had a vision, and switched from pre-med to English literature. Adam should be reading *Dubliners*, which he'll be tested on early tomorrow morning, but he's preoccupied with an experiment. He's smashing Percocet tablets with a hammer and trying to smoke the powder through a water pipe.

I have other companions in estrangement, way out here on the bell curve's leading edge, where our talent for multiple-choice tests has landed us without even the sketchiest survival instructions. Our club isn't one of the rich, exclusive outfits, where the pedigreed children of the establishment eat chocolate-dipped strawberries off silver trays carried by black waiters in starched white uniforms, but one that anyone can join, where geeks and misfits line up with plastic plates for veggie burgers and canned fruit salad. At the moment the club is struggling financially and has fewer than twenty paid-up members, including two religious

fanatics who came to Princeton as normal young men, I'm told, but failed somehow to mix and grew withdrawn. Not long from now, one will take a Bible passage too literally and pluck out one of his eyes in penance for some failing he won't disclose; the other will style himself a campus messiah and persuade a number of "disciples"—most of them black and here on scholarships—to renounce their degrees just before graduation as a protest against Princeton's fallenness.

The rest of us in the club feel almost as lost. One kid, a token North Dakotan (Princeton likes to boast that it has students from all fifty states), wears the same greaser haircut he brought from Fargo and has poured all his energy for the past few years into fronting a lackadaisical rock band that specializes in heartland heavy metal. His soul never made the leap from Main Street to the Ivy League. Another young man is nearly catatonic from dropping LSD and playing pinball in marathon sessions that sometimes last twelve hours. Strike a match an inch from his face and he won't flinch—his pupils won't even contract from the flame.

If my buddies from Minnesota could see me now, they wouldn't have a clue whom they were seeing, and I—also bewildered—wouldn't be able to help them. Four years ago my SAT scores set me on a trajectory. One day I looked down at a booklet filled with questions concerning synonyms and antonyms and the meeting times of trains on opposite tracks, and the next thing I knew I was opening thick envelopes from half the colleges in the country. One, from Macalester College, in St. Paul, contained an especially tempting offer: immediate admission as a freshman. I didn't even have to finish senior year in high school.

I enrolled the next fall, but with no intention of staying. I'd read my Fitzgerald, and I wanted to go east; I wanted to ride the train to the last station. As a natural-born child of the meritocracy, I'd been amassing momentum my whole life, entering spelling bees, vying for forensics medals, running my mouth in mock United Nations meetings and model state governments and student congresses,

and I knew only one direction: forward, onward. I lived for prizes, praise, distinctions, and I gave no thought to any goal higher or broader than my next report card. Learning was secondary; promotion was primary. No one had ever told me what the point was, except to keep on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient. What else was there?

Before I'd been at Macalester a month, I applied to transfer to Princeton as a sophomore. I was warned that only twenty students a year got into the university this way, but I was used to being the exception; it was the only condition I'd ever known. Like a novice gambler on a winning streak, I wasn't even sure that failure existed, except for others. To bolster my application, I looked around Macalester for a contest, any contest, that I might place first in, and I hit at last on a poetry competition that seemed to be attracting few entries. I'd never written serious poetry, but this didn't faze me. My desire to get ahead was all the inspiration I'd ever needed. Appetite can be a kind of genius.

I won the poetry contest. A few months later I found myself sitting in a Princeton lecture hall that was older than my home town, writing down a new word: "post-structuralism." I couldn't define it exactly, but I knew more or less what it meant: I was making progress of sorts. The student next to me bore a famous last name that I recognized from a high school history text (not Rockefeller, but close). Discovering that it was still in circulation among living people—individuals whom I was expected to befriend now and make a career among, if possible—renewed in me a sense of dislocation that I'd been fighting, and courting, since entering grade school.

Tonight, on speed and applying for the Rhodes in a room full of red-eyed former valedictorians, I'm more disoriented than ever. Only a few months short of graduation I've run out of thoughts, out of the stuff that thoughts are made from. I'm mute, aphasic. I can't write a word. A doctor I saw when I went home last summer pronounced me severely malnourished and put me on a regimen of

vitamins, but this is depletion of another kind. I've been fleeing upward since age five, learning just enough at every level to make it, barely, to the next one. I'm the system's pure product, clever and adaptable, not so much educated as wised-up; but now I've hit a wall.

I put my pen down as my friend holds out the water pipe stoked with pulverized pain pills. "You should try this," he says.

I flash back to that bus, to that bottle of cherry schnapps. Back then I knew where I was going, and that to get there I'd have to keep a clear head. But now I'm here, and my head doesn't function the way it used to. All thanks to a test that measured ... what, exactly? Nothing important, I've discovered. Nothing sustaining. Just "aptitude."

That's why we're here: we all showed aptitude. Aptitude for showing aptitude, mainly. That's what they wanted, so that's what we delivered. A talent for nothing, but a knack for everything.

Nobody told us it wouldn't be enough.

My first semester at Princeton, I had four roommates, who resembled no one I'd ever known: A foppish piano prodigy with a moustache, who dreamed of writing Broadway musical comedies and spent his free hours in robe and slippers, smoking Benson & Hedges Menthol 100s and hunching, vulturelike, over his piano, plinking out show tunes about doe-eyed ingénues who'd been seduced and ruined by caddish millionaires. The budding composer's pudgy heiress girlfriend, whose father owned a five-star Manhattan hotel and regularly sent a limousine on weekends so that his daughter could drink cocktails with celebrities, who—as I gathered from a snapshot she showed me—included the Bee Gees. The son of a New York City TV newscaster, who kept his cheeks fresh with Oil of Olay and treated the composer and the heiress as his surrogate parents, addressing them in baby talk and asking them to tuck him in at night, which they did, complete with

fairy tales. And an earnest Long Island Quaker kid with a short red beard, who played guitar and protested apartheid, which I pretended to be concerned about too, although I wasn't certain what it was. The SATs hadn't required such trivial knowledge.

One night a report came over the radio that John Lennon, my Quaker friend's hero, had been assassinated, which plunged the Quaker into fits of violent weeping in which I felt compelled to join. Lennon's death meant very little to me (my tastes ran to midwestern stadium rock), but I needed a good cry that night for other reasons.

It had all started one Sunday when the heiress, Jennifer, returned from one of her weekend jaunts lugging a case of champagne her father had given her. She saw me watching her from my bedroom doorway and invited me into the common living room, where we popped the cork on a bottle and drank the bubbly without glasses, licking the foam when it ran down the neck. This struck me as the height of decadence, and reason enough for betraying my high school buddies, whom I'd promised to keep in touch with but hadn't.

When the bottle of champagne was gone, Jennifer said, "You owe me twenty." I looked at her uncomprehendingly. "It's a good bottle," she said. "You owe me twenty."

I didn't have the money, and I said so. My parents sent checks now and then, but not for much; they lacked any sense of the cost of living at Princeton. My phone bills alone consumed most of their remittances, freezing me out of any real social life and limiting my wardrobe to a pair of Levi's; a blue T-shirt; two white dress shirts, which I seldom found occasion to wear; and one red, lumberjacky flannel number, which filled me with shame about my regional origins.

"Welsher," Jennifer said, putting me in my place. In Minnesota, I hadn't had a place, but here I did: several levels down from heiresses who charged their

roommates to drink free champagne. It seemed unfair that I had come so far in life only to find new ways to fall short.

The humiliations mounted. One afternoon a van from Bloomingdale's pulled up in front of our dormitory, and a crew of men began unloading furniture that appeared to belong on the set of a TV show about single young socialites. The men placed armchairs, lamps, tables, and a sofa in one corner of the living room and then unrolled an Oriental rug so vast that its edges curled up against the walls, blocking the electrical sockets. After directing the placement of each piece, Jennifer and her boyfriend sought me out in my tiny bedroom, whose only furnishings were a desk, a bed, and a bookcase fashioned from plastic milk crates. Owing to my budget, many of the books inside it were stolen from the university bookstore; I'd never bought books before, and couldn't believe how expensive the damned things were.

"We figured out everyone's share of the new living room," the boyfriend said. "Yours is five hundred and ten."

I laughed out loud. "But I didn't order any of it."

"Well, you'll benefit from it, won't you?" Jennifer said. This was my first encounter with a line of reasoning that would echo through my years at Princeton: even unbidden privileges must be paid for. Tuition, the university liked to tell us, covered only a fraction of the cost of our education. What's more, the benefits of a Princeton degree were so far-reaching and long-lasting, supposedly, that for the duration of our lives we would be expected to give money to various university funds and causes. I'd assumed that a deal was a deal when Princeton admitted me, but I was wrong. The price of getting in—to the university itself, and to the great world it promised to open up—was an endless dunning for nebulous services that weren't included in the initial quote.

After I told my roommates to stop bothering me, they convened a meeting in the

common room and voted to ban me from touching any item, including the rug, that I had not bought stock in. This put the entire suite—except for the bathroom, my bedroom, and the hallway leading to the front door—off limits to me. I raged inside. The common room had evolved into a concentrated version of what the whole campus had come to represent for me: a private association of the powerful that I'd been permitted to visit on a day pass, which, I sensed, could be revoked as suddenly as it had been issued.

I avoided my roommates and focused on my classwork. I chose to concentrate on English, since it sounded like something I might already know. I assumed that my classmates and I would study the classics and analyze their major themes, but instead we were buffeted, almost from day one, with talk of "theory," whatever that was. The basic meanings of the poems, short stories, and plays drawn from the hefty Norton anthologies that anchored our entry-level reading lists were treated as trivial, almost beneath discussion; what mattered, we learned, were our "critical assumptions."

I, for one, wasn't aware of having any. Until I was sixteen or so, my only reading had consisted of Hardy Boys mysteries, books on UFOs, world almanacs, a Time-Life history of World War II, and a handful of pulpy best sellers linked to movies (*The Day of the Jackal* and *The Exorcist* stand out), which I'd read for their sex scenes. I knew a few great authors' names from scanning dust jackets in the town library and watching the better TV quiz shows, but the only serious novels I'd ever cracked were *Moby-Dick* and *Frankenstein*—both sold to me by a crafty high school teacher as gripping tales of adventure, which they weren't.

With no stored literary material about which to harbor critical assumptions, I relied on my gift for mimicking authority figures and playing back to them their own ideas disguised as conclusions that I'd reached myself. The deployment of key words was crucial, as the recognition of them had been on the SATs. With one professor the charm was "ambiguity." With another "heuristic" usually did the

trick. Even when a poem or a story fundamentally puzzled me, I found that I could save face through terminology, as when I referred to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as "semiotically unstable."

The need to finesse my ignorance through such stunts left me feeling hollow and vaguely hunted. I sought solace in the company of other frauds (we seemed to recognize one another instantly), and together we refined our acts. We toted around books by Jacques Derrida, and spoke of "playfulness" and "textuality." We laughed at the notion of "authorial intention" and concluded, before reading even a hundredth of it, that the Western canon was illegitimate, an expression of powerful group interests that it was our sacred duty to transcend—or, failing that, to systematically subvert. In this rush to adopt the latest attitudes and please the younger and hipper of our instructors—the ones who drank with us in the Nassau Street bars and played the Clash on the tape decks of their Toyotas as their hands crept up pants and skirts—we skipped straight from ignorance to revisionism, deconstructing a body of literary knowledge that we'd never constructed in the first place.

I came to suspect that certain professors were on to us, and I wondered if they, too, were actors. In classroom discussions, and even when grading essays, they seemed to favor us over the hard workers, whose patient, sedimentary study habits were ill adapted, I concluded, to the new world of antic postmodernism that I had mastered almost without effort. To thinkers of this school, great literature was a con, and I—a born con man who hadn't read any great literature and was looking for any excuse not to—was eager to agree with them.

This lucky convergence of intellectual fashion and my illiteracy restored my pride and emboldened me socially. Maybe I belonged at Princeton after all. I took up with a moody crowd of avant-gardists, who hung around one of the campus theaters tripping on acid and staging absurdist plays by Sartre, Albee, and Ionesco. One production, which I assisted with, required the audience to

contemplate a stage filled with unoccupied metal folding chairs. My friends and I stood snickering in the wings, making bets on how long it would take for people to leave.

Who knew that serious drama could be like this? Who knew that the essence of high culture would turn out to be teasing the poor fools who still believed in it? Certainly no one back in Minnesota. Well, the joke was on them, and I was in on it. I could never go back there now, not with a straight face. It embarrassed me that I'd ever even lived there, knowing that people here on the East Coast (people like me—the new me) had been laughing at us all along.

It frightened me that had I not reached Princeton, I might never have discovered this; I might have remained a rube forever. This realization altered my basic loyalties. I decided that it was time to leave behind the folks who'd raised me and stand with the people who'd clued me in.

My closest friend as a junior was V, a Pakistani boy who'd disappointed his family—and even, as he told it, his nation's leaders—by leaving his intended major, electrical engineering, for philosophy. He claimed that his decision was purely intellectual, but I suspected a social motive. Among the artsy eastern prep-school graduates who composed the campus's tastemaking elite, philosophy was in vogue just then, especially the arcane linguistic variety that allowed one to brandish Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, whereas engineering was deemed unsuitable for anyone other than indentured Third Worlders whose governments were paying their tuition in return for future work designing missiles and irrigation projects.

This had been V's deal. Once he broke it, whether out of conviction or in deference to fashion, he couldn't go home again. That made two of us.

One cold winter night we set out down Prospect Avenue toward one of the eating clubs that wouldn't have us. On the way we talked Wittgenstein, loudly, so that

others would hear us. Drunk on a mixture of beer, resentment, and longing, we were determined to crash a party we'd heard about. Girls went by, but not a lot of them, and few that were available to our kind. Twelve years after Princeton had gone coed, the campus sex ratio still favored males by a considerable margin, placing a premium on pretty women that only rich boys and quarterbacks could pay. Our shape-shifting, agile, approval-seeking brains may have entitled us to live and study with the children of the ruling class, but not to mate with them.

This was the system's great flaw, and it enraged us. A pure meritocracy, we'd discovered, can only promote; it can't legitimize. It can confer success but can't grant knighthood. For that it needs a class beyond itself: the high-born genealogical peerage that aptitude testing was created to supplant with a cast of brainy up-and-comers. But we still needed to impress them: the WASP New Englanders with weekend coke habits, well-worn deck shoes, and vaguely leftist politics devised in reaction to their parents' conservatism, to which they'd slowly return as they aged. They didn't have our test scores, but they had style, a charismatic aura of entitlement, and V and I were desperate for a piece of it.

Somehow we slipped past the door into a room jammed with handsome, arrhythmic dancers in pastel polo shirts with turned-up collars. When we tried to join the fun, the crowd contracted and squeezed us out in a kind of reflexive mass immune response. We retreated to the professionally staffed bar, and in no time I was drunk and plotting revenge.

I targeted a girl with pearl earrings whose solid, columnar figure, husky voice, and rubber-banded sheaf of wheaty hair held no physical attraction for me but aroused my inner revolutionary. Like a frustrated stableboy in an old novel, I wanted to seduce and ruin her. Amazingly, we ended up alone on the bare wood floor of an empty upstairs room. The girl lay under me, kissing with a suction that actually drew blood from my chapped lips. She tugged at my zipper and muttered hearty obscenities. Her passion was frank, elemental, and intimidating,

permitting me no illusion of domination. I was servicing a fair-haired warrior goddess, bred to lead and to give birth to leaders.

But she was drunker than I knew; as the act began in earnest, she fell asleep—a total power outage. Should I press on? Here was my chance to vent a primitive fury on a symbol of everything that tortured me.

I couldn't do it. I fled downstairs, found V, and made him leave with me. On the walk back to his room he said, "What assholes."

"We're just as bad," I said. I didn't explain.

We sobered up in V's room by drinking coffee. As he tended to do when pressured by strong emotion, he launched into one of his disquisitions on language, and I chimed in with my own thoughts now and then, though my mind was on the girl back at the club. V's point, I gathered, was his usual one: words referred to other words, not to the world, and the noblest, grandest words, such as "truth" and "God," referred to nothing. Or maybe I misunderstood. It hardly mattered. It had been years since I'd known what I was talking about, and I no longer expected such conversations to educate or enlighten me; I just expected them to sound good. They were catechisms, incantations. They reminded me of the short-lived high school class in which we'd tried to learn German phonetically, by repeating sentences from tapes.

Tonight, though, I couldn't bear the posing, and I understood why V's government was mad at him. I excused myself to use the bathroom, filled a glass with water from the tap, looked in the mirror, and beheld an absence—nothing but the reflected door behind me and a bathrobe hanging on a hook. Where was my face? I knew it still existed, because I could feel it with my fingertips, but I couldn't find it with my eyes—a hallucination in reverse.

"I need a doctor," I told V when I came back. "How late is the clinic open?"

He ignored me. He'd been holding a thought about Hegel all this time and was writing it down so that he wouldn't forget it later. I left him and walked back down Prospect Avenue toward the elitist eating club, thinking that if I could find the girl I'd left there and have a normal human word with her, it would help me see my face again. But the party was over and the door was locked.

I didn't have to wait long for my crack-up.

During a Chaucer lecture the next semester I lost the ability to discern the boundaries between spoken words. Professor F. opened his mouth and out flowed slushy streams of sonic nonsense with no meter, no structure, no definition. I closed my notebook and managed to isolate a few short phrases from the garbled flow, but I couldn't link them into sentences.

I decided I was tired, and I must have been, because once I lay down, I slept for twenty hours. When I finally got up, the floor felt like a waterbed, and I had to brace myself against a chair. A moment later I heard rats inside the walls. I knew that the noises came from warming water pipes, but I couldn't stop picturing hungry rodents nibbling through the plaster into my room.

I started skipping classes, which wasn't like me, since the heart of my personal program for winning distinction, despite my baseline bafflement, was the diligent daily maintenance of friendly relations with my professors. I'd learned that by showing up early to say hello and chat with them, staying late to ask them extra questions, and dropping in during office hours to drink their stale coffee and let them bum my cigarettes (they had always just quit smoking, it seemed, but without conviction), I could pull down Bs, at least. If I also showed signs of having read their books (particularly if the course did not require me to), I could manage As.

But I'd grown too blurred to keep up this trickery. I embraced dissociation instead.

There is no drug scene like an Ivy League drug scene. Kids can't just get high; they have to know why they're doing it. They have to back up their mischief with manifestos. The most popular one among the students I knew held that drugs, especially psychedelic drugs, helped to break down the rigid mental structures that restricted one's full humanity. This belief in creative derangement came down to us from Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the Beat poets, but in my case it didn't quite apply, because my mind had little structure to begin with.

Our LSD sessions were the opposite of parties; they brought on bouts of crushing introspection and spirals of anxious cerebration. One evening at dinner Adam, my ex—pre-med friend, slipped me a square of perforated blotter paper and invited me to walk with him to the Institute for Advanced Study, a lofty think tank secluded in the woods. The place was best known as a haven for world-class physicists, including Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein, and through its golden windows we glimpsed the silhouettes of Nobel Prize winners, their heads surrounded by pulsing pink coronas that persisted even when we blinked. Now and then someone would pass us in the darkness, absorbed, we suspected, in algebraic reveries related to fusion reactors and plasma beams. Toward midnight we sat down under a tree—a benevolent presence that seemed to offer shelter from the sinister brilliance all around us—and reached the conclusion that Princeton was a portal for arrogant, Luciferian energies bent on the overthrow of God and Nature. We vowed to fight back. Scooping up clods of mud, we smeared it on our faces and then danced like druids, at last attracting attention from a guard whose flashlight beam swarmed with photons the size of snowflakes. He asked us what we were doing. "Repenting," we said.

Every month or so one of my acid-head friends would crack, and the mood of our demimonde would darken. One night at an off-campus communal house a buddy of mine who studied architecture mixed peyote with amphetamines and decided that the key to time travel was to stand in the basement and repeat the mantra "I

am willing, sir." After he'd chanted for three hours, we tried to rescue him, but he punched and kicked until we backed away. Toward morning we found him praying on his knees wearing only his boxer shorts and socks. He was holding a lighted white candle, and in its radiance we could see teardrops dripping off his chin.

Then there was the girl who climbed onto the rail of her dormitory's interior staircase and hurled herself onto a landing four floors down, clutching a copy of *Anna Karenina*. She survived, but she had to wear a back brace for the rest of the semester. She told me she'd jumped to prove her love for Adam and would do it again unless he married her. Her voice was rough and lumpy (from tranquilizers?), and her hands slowly opened and closed like gasping fish.

My aphasia worsened by the day. I could feel words disappearing from my memory like defective bulbs in a strand of Christmas lights. My right eyelid twitched when I read. Straight lines of print rippled and broke apart. My education was running in reverse as my mind shed its outermost layer of signs and symbols and shrank back to its mute, preliterate core.

My breakdown climaxed with a strange prank that could have been taken straight from a bad novel about collegiate social Darwinism. I was flying on acid in the Terrace Club library, along with a couple of visual-arts majors who were trying their hands at Pollock-style "action painting," when I walked Leslie, a handsome blond campus prince—the descendant of a legendary industrialist—whom I knew from our vicious little theater scene but had never felt worthy of engaging in conversation.

"Walter, may I talk to you?" he said. I was astonished that he knew my name.

I followed him outside to his car, a new European sports coupe with leather seats, where he asked me to help him with a "trust experiment" related to his sociology thesis. He couldn't describe the experiment, he said, because it might prejudice

the results, and I didn't press him. I was glad to help. This was the social break I'd waited years for.

Leslie started the car as I buckled in next to him. His instructions were simple: don't speak and don't resist. Then he blindfolded me with a strip of fuzzy dark cloth. He turned on a Laurie Anderson tape full blast—a gale of futuristic electronica that made me ashamed of my Top 40 tastes—and drove without stopping for what seemed like an hour, ending up on a bumpy stretch of road that I took to be rural and remote. At some point my blindfold loosened and slipped down, and I resecured it without being asked.

The car stopped moving. Leslie got out, walked around to my side, opened the door, set his hands on my shoulders, and marched me forward across an expanse of spongy, uneven earth. He halted and commanded me to kneel, urging me down by pressing on my skull. I suspected by then that I'd been lured into a sadistic hazing ritual, but instead of lashing out or fleeing, I fantasized about the sort of club that I'd been deemed worthy of auditioning for.

"Remove the blindfold," Leslie said.

When I raised my dazzled eyes, I saw, about fifty yards in front of me, surrounded by stately trees, an actual castle, with countless tall windows and pediments and columns. In the center of its crescent driveway stood an enormous dry fountain of leaping cupids.

"My family's estate," Leslie said. "Behold, poor serf! Behold a power you will never know!"

With that he ran back to his car and drove away.

It took me three hours, walking and hitchhiking, to make it back to the campus. The LSD turned the trip into an odyssey of spectral laughing faces in the sky and dark, miasmic whirlpools underfoot. When I finally lay down in my room, I asked

myself why I'd been chosen for this elaborate humiliation, and concluded that the answer lay in the success of a play on, of all subjects, 1960s pop art that I'd written and staged. I burned with shame for obeying Leslie's orders and blamed the drugs for my craven passivity, though I knew deep down that the problem was ambition. The drugs I could give up, but not the ambition.

When summer vacation arrived, a few weeks later, I chose to stay in Princeton and find a job rather than go home and shock my family with my listlessness and dissipation. I also set out to rebuild my brain.

I bought a dictionary and a thesaurus and instituted a daily regimen of linguistic calisthenics. My alarm clock woke me every morning at five, and for the next three hours I'd lie in bed, with my reference books propped up against my knees, and repeat aloud, in alphabetical order, every word on every single page, along with its definitions and major synonyms. I found the ritual humbling but soothing, and for the first time in my academic career I could feel myself making measurable strides, however tiny. "Militate." "Militia." "Milk." I spent as much energy on the easy words as I did on the hard ones—an act of contrition for squandering my high-percentile promise.

My job, at Firestone Library, helped advance this program of self-styled mental reconstruction. Working under a young crew boss who belonged to a self-improvement cult led by Werner Erhard, the founder of est, I emptied quarter-mile-long shelves of books, loaded them onto rolling metal carts, and transferred them to new shelves, one floor down, in perfect Dewey decimal order. When breaks were called, I opened whichever volume I happened to be holding at the moment and read until it was time to go to work again, picking up reams of miscellaneous knowledge about such topics as Zoroastrianism and the history of animal husbandry. And unlike the material from my classes and lectures, these fragments stuck with me—maybe because I'd collected them for their own sake, not as cards to be played at final-exam time and then forgotten when a new hand

was dealt.

One day, during lunch, my boss sat down beside me while I was reading up on Zarathustra, whom I'd known before then only as a word in the title of a book by Nietzsche that I'd often argued with V about, despite never having gotten through the preface.

"Perpetual self-betterment," my boss said. "That's man's purpose on earth, you know."

I nodded.

"Can you come to a meeting of people who share your drive?" he said. "It's absolutely free of charge."

"I'm sorry. I have to do this thing alone."

"What thing?"

"Reconnecting certain wires."

By August, I felt human again. The hollow feeling behind my forehead was replaced by a reassuring fullness. The tics and twitches subsided. By all appearances, I'd saved myself—at least for the time being. With graduation just a year away and no firm career plans or even any career desires (my vague interest in writing poetry didn't qualify), the only game I knew how to play—scaling the American meritocratic mountain, not to gain wisdom but just because it was there—was, I feared, about to end.

Making money didn't interest me. While my classmates streamed into on-campus interviews with Wall Street brokerage firms (becoming an "arbitrageur" was all the rage then, even among students who as juniors had vowed to spend their lives painting or composing), I cast about for another test to take, another contest to compete in. I needed medals, acceptance letters, status. To me, wealth and

influence were trivial by-products of improving one's statistical scores in the great generational tournament of worthiness. The score itself was the essential prize.

I applied for two scholarships to Oxford, an institution I regarded much as I'd once regarded Princeton—as a sociocultural VIP room that happened to hold classes in the back. The first was the Rhodes, created to fashion leaders for some future utopian global order. Why I imagined that I was "Rhodes material"—which at Princeton meant someone resembling Bill Bradley, our most widely known recipient of the honor—I had no idea. The other students I knew of who had applied were conspicuous campus presences, top athletes and leaders of student government, whereas I was a nervous loner in an old raincoat whose most notable accomplishment was writing and staging a blank-verse play loosely based on Andy Warhol. Still, I sensed I had a chance. I'd learned by then that the Masters of Advancement use a rough quota system in their work, reserving a certain number of wild-card slots for overreaching oddballs.

When a letter arrived informing me that I'd been chosen as a state finalist, I bought a blue suit on credit and flew back to Minnesota for my interviews. A doorman at the Minneapolis Club directed me to a gloomy paneled room, where my nametagged fellow candidates were enjoying a get-acquainted cocktail party with the members of the committee that would formally screen us the next morning.

I armed myself with a cheese cube on a napkin and a glass of red wine and strode into the fray, looking for someone important to impress, but my rivals had gotten a jump on me and wouldn't make space in the tight perimeters around the professors and business people tasked with assessing our leadership potential. I noticed that none of the other candidates were drinking their wine; they were using their glasses as props. I looked down at my empty goblet. Caught out again.

Seeing my rivals up close unsettled me. Back when I took the SATs, the contest had been impersonal, statistical, waged against an anonymous national peer group. This time the competition was all too personal—about a dozen of us remained. One short-haired young woman in a dark suit was holding forth on national health-care policy to a man who kept looking past her at a prettier girl whose panty lines were discernible through her skirt. A handsome young brute whose tag identified him as a West Point cadet was discussing his fitness regimen with a lady on the committee who seemed to be sleeping standing up. Every few minutes everyone changed partners, like dancers in a Jane Austen ballroom scene. What expert mixers they were! I hated them.

By the time I managed to corner a few committee members, I was feeling drunk and squirrely. To give the irresistible impression of humble origins transcended, I affected a lazy backwoods drawl and combined it with a Sunday-best vocabulary straight out of my thesaurus exercises. I got off the word "heuristic" once, a magical bit of scholastic legerdemain, but I pronounced it in the manner of Johnny Cash. I knew I sounded demented, but I couldn't stop myself. Even worse, I'd lit a cigarette, making me the party's only smoker aside from a bearded old fellow with a pipe whom I knew to be an English professor at a local college. I approached him, seeking cover for my vice, and babbled away about my love of Whitman, a name I'd picked out of a hat. He seemed to sense this.

At the end of the party we drew times for our morning interviews. I drew the first slot: seven sharp. I showed up pale and trembling and dehydrated, speckled with crumbs from a cinnamon bun I'd wolfed. My rivals were already seated in the waiting room, some of them reading *The New York Times*. This was a masterly touch—one I wished I'd thought of.

My name was called, and I sat down in a conference room at a long table of poker-faced interrogators equipped with pencils, clipboards, and questionnaires. "What, in your opinion, is the primary problem facing our world today?" one

woman asked, not even giving me time to sip my coffee.

The moisture inside my mouth evaporated; I'd expected a little small talk first. I knew in my gut that to answer the question creatively would be a mistake; these were sober, high-minded people, dedicated to serving humanity by preselecting future American presidents and United Nations ambassadors. The only issues worthy of their seriousness, I strongly suspected, were the obvious two: poverty and nuclear proliferation. My chance to exhibit originality would come with the inevitable follow-up: "And how would you deal with this problem?" That's where the challenge lay. I wanted to bring in poetry—but how? By calling for a new, transformative literature pledged to the empowerment of the voiceless through a concern with the basic global values of justice and mutual respect?

That might be a winner, if I could just remember it.

But I couldn't. Instead I said, "Miscommunication. I think that's the biggest problem we face these days."

"Expand on that," a quiet female voice said. "Miscommunication between whom?"

I offered a list of miscommunicators that included governments and their subjects, men and women, and even—absurdly—animals and human beings. Sometime during my speech I realized I'd lost. I'd never lost at anything before, not even a spelling bee, and the feeling was like waking on the Moon after going to bed on Earth. No sounds, no light, no air, no gravity.

I returned to the waiting room ten minutes later. My rivals scanned my face for clues: how had my interview changed the odds for them? I gave them more information than they deserved, hoping to win their favor for the future. Someday one of them might run the country, and I wanted to be remembered as a good sport.

"You're safe," I told them all. "I screwed it up."

They couldn't help smiling. Then one girl hugged me. "You really shouldn't consider it a loss," she said. "You should feel honored you reached the final group." I returned the hug and left the building, unwilling to wait for the winners to be named. Later I found out that one of them was the girl who'd tried to boost my spirits, which made her gesture seem patronizing in retrospect. She knew she was bound for the sharp end of the pyramid, and was merely practicing her royal manners.

I was two weeks away from an interview for another scholarship, sponsored by the Keasbey Foundation, less coveted than the Rhodes but more exclusive (only a handful were given out each year). Yet my broken momentum had sapped my confidence, and I did nothing to prepare myself. I drifted through classes and lectures, astonished anew by how little four years of college had affected me. The great poems and novels mystified me still, even the few I'd managed to read, and my math skills, once adequate for the SATs, had shriveled to nothing through lack of use. The lone science class I'd been required to take, an introductory geology course, was graded pass/fail, and though I'd passed it (barely), I still wasn't sure what "igneous" meant.

All around me friends were securing places in grad schools and signing contracts with worldwide corporations, but I found myself without prospects, in a vacuum. I'd never bothered to contemplate the moment when the quest for trophies would end and the game of trading on them would begin. Once, I'd had nowhere to go but up. Now, it seemed, I had nowhere to go at all.

For my interview I drove down to Philadelphia with Princeton's other Keasbey nominee, the football team's starting quarterback. I'd never expected to meet him in this life. He was smaller than I thought he'd be, and a faster, more impressive talker. Under his short haircut he seemed sad, though, as if he, too, feared his life

had already run its course. His car was old, not a quarterback's car at all, and I realized that he wasn't one anymore, except in memory. The season was over.

In the elegant conference room of a downtown law firm the Keasbey Foundation's trustees explained the peculiar history of their fellowship to me. Its founder, now deceased, was a wealthy daughter of industry who'd never married. One spring, however, as a blushing society girl, she'd attended an Oxford college ball with an English boy whose demeanor had so charmed her that she later devised a way to re-create him by funding the education of young Americans who, with the proper training, it was hoped, might wear his cummerbund. Pure Henry James, this story. The trustees went on to tell us that Miss Keasbey had intended the fellowship for young men only, but a court challenge had made young women eligible.

The trustees interviewed the ex-quarterback first, which gave me an hour to work on my persona as a young aristocrat in the rough. If my schooling had taught me anything, it was how to mold myself—my words, my range of references, my body language—into whatever shape the day required, and by the time I sat down in the conference room, I'd hit on a pose of dreamy provincial yearning à la the youthful Tennessee Williams, but marginally more virile. When asked who my favorite author was, I answered Lord Byron—for the life he'd lived as much as for his writings. (I might not have understood Romantic poetry, but I knew what the names of the poets signified.) When someone brought up my D in Spanish—that glaring stain on my academic record, which the Rhodes committee had also noted, provoking in me much defensive stuttering—I confessed that I'd stayed up late drinking before the final and let it go at that. This elicited broad smiles. The next question touched on my athletic interests—or, rather, my apparent lack thereof. I replied that I liked to exert myself in solitude, by taking long walks. "Very British," one man said.

I could feel in the trustees' handshakes, as we parted, a distinct congratulatory

warmth. I'd won again, and by doing what I did best: exploiting my meticulously indexed collection of lofty buzzwords, charming gestures, and apt allusions. Just days before, I'd felt a reckoning looming, but now I was off to Oxford. I'd been spared.

"I flubbed it," the ex-quarterback told me on the drive back. "How did you do, you think?"

I didn't dare tell him.

The summer before I left for Oxford, I found myself back home, drinking beer with a high school friend in a pickup truck parked next to the river. His name was Karl, and he'd stuck around to lend a hand on his family's dairy farm. Most everyone else from our crowd had moved away, part of the ongoing small-town diaspora that will someday completely depopulate rural America. Our old buddies worked on salmon boats in Alaska. They dealt cards in Las Vegas. They sold Fords in Denver. Some, having grown fed up with low-wage jobs, were studying computer programming or starting small businesses with borrowed money. I had a hard time imagining their lives, especially if they'd married and had kids, but I didn't have to: they were gone. I was gone too, up a ladder into the clouds. Up a ladder made of clouds.

"So, what are your views on Emerson?" Karl asked me.

We'd been discussing books, at his request. He'd looked me up that night for this very purpose. While I'd been off at Princeton, polishing my act, he'd become a real reader and also a devoted Buddhist. He said he had no one to talk to, no one who shared his interest in art and literature, so when he'd heard I was home, he'd driven right over. We had a great deal in common, Karl said.

But we didn't, in fact, and I didn't know how to tell him this. To begin with, I couldn't quote the Transcendentalists as accurately and effortlessly as he could. I

couldn't quote anyone. I'd honed more-marketable skills: for flattering those in authority without appearing to, for ranking artistic reputations according to the latest academic fashions, for matching my intonations and vocabulary to the background of my listener, for placing certain words in smirking quotation marks and rolling my eyes when someone spoke too earnestly about some "classic" work of "literature," for veering left when the conventional wisdom went right and then doubling back if the consensus changed.

Flexibility, irony, class consciousness, contrarianism. I'd gone to Princeton, and soon I'd go to Oxford, and these, I was about to tell Karl, are the ways one gets ahead now—not by memorizing old Ralph Waldo. I'd learned a lot since I'd aced the SATs, about the system, about myself, and about the new class the system had created, which I was now part of, for better or for worse. The class that runs things. The class that makes the headlines—that writes the headlines, and the stories under them.

But I kept all this to myself; I didn't tell Karl. He was a reader, a Buddhist, and an old friend, and there were some things he might not want to know. I wasn't so sure I wanted to know them either.

My cynicism had peaked, but later that summer something happened that changed me—not instantly but decisively. A month before I was scheduled to fly to England and resume my career as a facile ignoramus, I came down with a mild summer cold that lingered, festered, and turned into pneumonia, forcing me to spend two weeks in bed. One feverish night I found myself standing in front of a bookcase in the living room that held a row of fancy leather-bound volumes my mother had bought through the mail when I was little. Assuming that the books were chiefly decorative, I'd never even bothered to read their titles, but that night, bored and sick, I picked one up: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Then I did something unprecedented for me: I carried it back to my bedroom and actually read it—every chapter, every page. A few days later I repeated the feat with *Great*

Expectations, another canonical stalwart that I'd somehow made it through Princeton without opening.

And so, belatedly, haltingly, and almost accidentally, it began: the education I'd put off while learning to pass as someone in the know. I wasn't sure what it would get me, whose approval it might win, or how long it might take to complete, but for once those weren't my first concerns. Alone in my room, exhausted and apprehensive, I no longer cared about self-advancement. I wanted to lose myself. I wanted to read. I wanted to find out what others thought.

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