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# THE KIND OF THING I WROTE IN COLLEGE

BY S.I. COLEMAN

THEY SAY YOU'RE ALWAYS SUPPOSED TO WRITE SOMETHING.

No matter what that something might be, no matter how badly you think you're blocked, no matter what's gone wrong and what you think might fix it, you're always supposed to write something. What the hell do you think I'm doing now?

I'm writing. That's what I'm doing. This is the way I wrote back in college.

Almost. I was usually drunk then. I don't drink anymore. I had a drinking problem in college. I drank too much. I drank by myself. During those times I wrote, mostly about being drunk or about writing or about being in college. Maybe that's why I'm blocked—because I no longer drink and I'm no longer in college. Maybe that's why I'm writing about writing.

I need a drink. What I need is a story, but I'd settle for a drink. I've needed a story for ten weeks. I've needed a drink for two and a half years. I'd settle for a story. Until then, I'll write about college.

I was hot shit in college. I was going to write the next great American novel. We all were, but I really was. I read all the books about writers, and I wrote papers about them and got good grades. I wrote stories about writing and I got them published in the student literary journal. I was

Silence. In retrospect it's kind of funny. I've never said anything so melodramatic in my life. And if she weren't a mom, I'd have probably had a hard time believing she took me seriously. But needless to say, I still carry the guilt.

Fast forward to this fall. I had just returned home from moving out of my college house. The summer had been a sequence of false endings, beginning with graduation, a return week visit, and then a final "move out weekend." Each time I said some goodbyes, but it never seemed quite

over until a few days ago, when we took down our hand-painted "No Parents Allowed" wooden sign, and threw out our ultimate shrine to sarcasm, a fresco sized Mariah Carey poster. They had both come to symbolize our collegiate antics, childish and bursting at the seams with jack-assery. But as I stood in the kitchen, talking to my mom

about how college was really over now, about how I would never have that little responsibility, and how there were some people I would never see again, she interrupted me with what I would *now* consider the cruelest statement known to mankind: "It was the best four years of your life." She had always said, "it will be." But now she had the brass to say "it was."

And for a second I thought she was kidding. I mean, she had to be, right? Aren't mom's supposed to say that about every part of your life? Maybe

she's just getting even with me for what I said when I had more pimples than years on this planet. Or maybe she's right and I should be appreciative of these fruits from

the tree of motherly wisdom.

They really were the best four years of my life. No lying. I made more friends and experienced more crazy, inane, harebrained, and youthfully exuberant activities than I could have ever imaged as a fifteen year old, sitting in the den playing Strat-O-Matic by myself and watching Snick. I met my best friends on that second day of college and proceeded to hang out with them and only them for the rest of the year. We went to some frat parties. One of us rushed, then found out we hated jock parties with sloppy freshmen girls in those Wilma Flintstone tops. I had my first girlfriend complete with an extended and heart wrenching breakup my sophomore year.

Now, I said I'd had a drinking problem in college. Nobody knew this, and that's why I'm sure. I'm certain I had one later, positive about that, but I'm sure I did then. I'm sure because nobody knew, and you know you have a drinking problem when no one knows you have a drinking problem, and no one did. Especially not my professors, many of whom I'd written drunken essays and exams for, composed drunken short stories about being drunk, many of whom I'd bid good morning only minutes after my daily protein shake of grape juice and vodka.

It was cold on that Thursday, the kind of cold that comes in October where the sun still shines and warms your darker clothes but your hands and feet snap like wet celery (I never would have used a simile like that back in college—I would have thought it beneath me). We started hitting the ball around to warm up some. Jensen and Fitzgerald were wearing sweatsuits because they were older and couldn't handle the cold so well. I was wearing my usual tennis shorts and warm up jacket. I was pretty tanked, that kept me warm, but I could still hit the ball ok.

I was good at doing things while I was drunk back then, and not just because I'd had practice. I knew I was drinking and I knew I was drunk and I knew no one could tell. I knew. Don't think I didn't.

When everybody was warm we started playing, me on one side and Jensen and Fitzgerald on the other. Jensen had played in college and Fitzgerald was in a men's league, but they both knew I could lick them so they played together. Usually, I played with Fitzgerald and Raab played with Jensen, but, like I said, Raab couldn't come that day. Since I was playing alone, I took the first service.

Jensen played the deuce side and Fitzgerald played add. He liked to crowd me. My first serve was wide, in the alley, and I paced back behind the baseline and took a long swig from my water bottle. There was gin in it.

The second serve was in play. I rushed the net and put one right at Fitzgerald's feet. Fitzgerald sort of scuffled out of the way and Jensen made a go for it, but his glasses fell off and he stepped on them, square on both lenses, just smashed them into sand. He still got to the ball, though, and I was a little slow from the booze and from watching Jensen smash his glasses so the ball hit me in the shoulder. I wasn't expecting it to come back.

Jensen swore and knelt down to pick up the glasses, but he couldn't see too well without them, didn't know how badly they were smashed, and he jammed his finger into the broken pieces and cut it pretty good. Not deep, or anything, but the slivers of that prescription glass are sharp and Jensen's vision was pretty lousy—he had thick glasses. It bled a lot for a finger. We didn't know this at the time, but he got a piece of the bifocal

body slam her over the stuffed mountain goat in the lobby. Where did this angst come from?

Each of the short-lived jobs I've held have fallen into the same pattern. The first few weeks are exciting and invigorating. After the freshness wears off, going to work everyday becomes more of a chore. And then in the last weeks, my energy—and my enthusiasm—returns.

There's closure and a sense of satisfaction that last week of work. It's like finishing a really long Russian novel. No matter how hard it was to get through, you're glad you made it. This was what my last week as a bell boy was like.

Clean the bathtub? Done. Bring in more firewood the size of brontosaurus thighs? No problem. Drive a disgruntled guest over to another motel? Of course! I got to know guests' names again. I actually spoke to them when they inquired about the weather rather than just pointing to the forecast.

Ironically, I got some of the best tips of the summer that final week, when tips were an afterthought. And for the moment, I wished I could be a bell boy for the rest of my life.

I've concluded that being a bell boy isn't fundamentally different than any other job. You live through work day in and day out (and sometimes night in and night out) and you pick up its routine, learn its lessons, and laugh at its absurdities.

I don't know if I liked my bell boy job more than reporting. Each had its simple pleasures, like raising the flag in the blood-red dawn or crafting a description that nailed someone's personality, and each had its frustrations, be those crabby guests or cranky editors. But I know that whatever it is I'm doing, I'll enjoy it more if I don't view it as a paycheck, stepping stone or a resume builder.

During one of my final nights as a bell boy I had a late-night conversation with a visiting Presbyterian minister. We spoke on the front porch in view of a full moon. The minister told me that after holding a variety of jobs, including in hotels, he'd enrolled in Princeton Theology Seminary at age 42. He was now nearly 50, and was visiting this park for the first time with his new wife.

"Life is long," he told me. "There's so much pressure to get it all together at such a young age. But look at me. It'll come."

Six months after graduation, I'm still figuring out what to do with my degree (and my life). But I'm much less anxious than when I first stepped into the real world. And if I end up being a bell boy again, I could probably handle that, too.



# VANDERBOOSH AND ME

BY PETER IAN ASEN

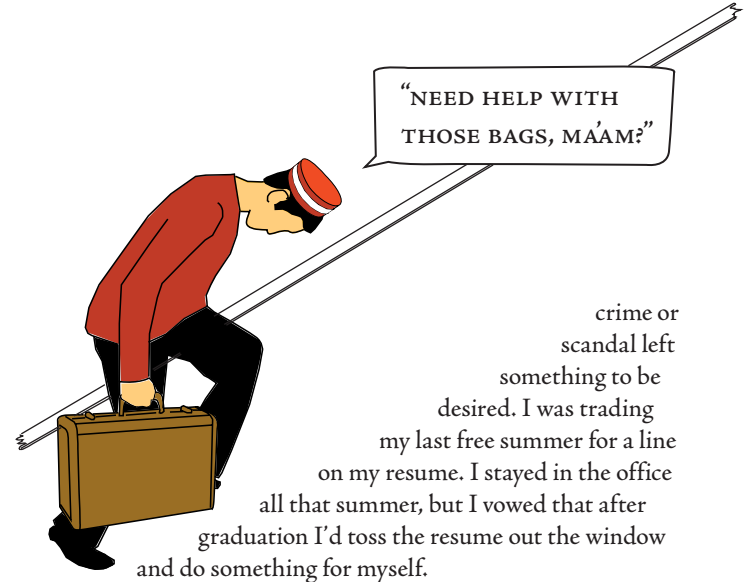


ADRIAN IS 24 YEARS OLD, AND STILL WEARS WORN BLUE sneakers with red cloth letters over the toes—an “L” on one and an “R” on the other. When he is away from home, he carries a toothbrush in the left pocket of his jeans jacket. He has sewn lightning bolts on the jacket’s arms. He smiles often, and laughs just as much. I like him a hell of a lot.

I met Adrian through my friend Sam about 16 months ago. Sam and I were both news editors for the College Hill Independent, a student weekly for Brown University. At the time, Adrian was writing news shorts for our irreverent *Week in Review* section under the recently acquired pseudonym “Ryan Vanderboosh.” He and Sam spent spring afternoons sitting in their ‘office’ on the steps of Brown’s Applied Mathematics building, drinking 40-ouncers out of brown bags, composing ridiculous articles, and laughing.

In one such piece on a 13 year-old graduate of Randolph Macon College, Sam made the sort of journalistically unorthodox move that became typical of *Week in Review*: he quoted Adrian. Adrian’s take on the collegiate question was typical of his own gonzo journalism and self-effacing attitude. “When asked to comment on [the graduate]’s amazing talent and maturity,” Sam wrote, “college dropout Ryan Vanderboosh commented: ‘Oh yeah? Just wait’ll he discovers weed, sex and alcohol.’”

This was a sort of joke, but only sort of. Adrian was a college dropout, or, rather, he was a college expellee. Weed, sex, and alcohol did not have



crime or scandal left something to be desired. I was trading my last free summer for a line on my resume. I stayed in the office all that summer, but I vowed that after graduation I’d toss the resume out the window and do something for myself.

Graduation came, and I scoured the internet for work: a waiter on Alaskan cruises, a ranch hand in Colorado, a shuttle driver in Martha’s Vineyard. And then, this job fell into my lap: Bell boy in Glacier National Park. I didn’t even know what a bell boy was. Next thing I know, I am one.

It didn’t take me long to learn the essentials of the bell boy gig. You take the luggage. You carry it. You put it in the room. Not to say the work was easy; to retain the lodge’s “rustic charm,” there were no elevators on any of the hotel’s four floors. Bell boys became human lifts.

Every day my coworker and I stood on the front porch greeting families, couples and colossal coach busses teeming with senior citizens. Along with them they brought luggage. Lots and lots of luggage. An x-ray of their behemoth bags would surely reveal concrete mix, the complete Encyclopedia Britannica set, and the missing weapons of mass destruction.

After a couple weeks of this workout regime, I developed calluses the size of Mount Rushmore and grizzly-like trapezius muscles. I climbed more stairs than Richard Simmons has ever dreamed. Basically, I got paid to get into shape.

Bell boys make a mere \$6.35 an hour, similar to the pay for front desk clerks, maids and most of the other employees. But one thing separated us from the pack: Tips. On a good day we made more than \$100 extra, even after my co-worker and I split the loot.

Adrian said his most important recent activity had been seeing his friends' bands play. While I was there we went to the Lion's Den to see Addison Groove Project, whose lead singer is a buddy of Adrian's. Another night, he'd gone to the Bowery Ballroom to see Zox, a group of friends from Brown and Providence. By the time he'd gotten to the show it had sold out.

Adrian does not play music himself. He had just taken up drums when I first met him, practicing on John Zox's drum set when he was living with the bandleader in Providence after his expulsion. When he came back to New York, an old high school teacher allowed him to use the drums at the school on occasion, but that opportunity eventually ended. He could have afforded to buy himself a set but he didn't. He explained this to me by saying that he didn't need any more things to be bad at. He laughed, but it seemed like another one of those jokes that was true.

I feel sorry that Adrian didn't finish college and that he probably won't anytime soon. Not because it's the kind of thing that embarrasses parents in our class background, but because he seems so lost. What I don't know, and what I am afraid to ask directly, is whether Adrian regrets this himself. I also don't know exactly how to explain why an overachieving student, a recovering obsessive perfectionist like myself, would be so drawn to such an unapologetic underachiever like Adrian. I have some ideas, though.

I was too smart and too wealthy for comfort in the public elementary and middle schools I attended. Not that I was super-rich, but, compared to relatively poor white students and the many immigrants and refugees, I stuck out a bit. I was, one might say, not very cool in those days, at least as cool is defined when at 10 or 12. My lunch money was rarely stolen, but I fell prey more than once to that famous northern torture of the whitewash, where a victim's head is shoved into the side of a snow bank. In college, when an anonymous poster on a Brown Daily Herald web forum called me a "Communist fag" in response to a column I'd written about campaign finance reform, the fag part of the epithet brought back memories of childhood. Like today, being called a fag was probably more about a lack of masculinity than any perceived sexuality, but then those two are often confused in the minds of young and old.

Things improved when I moved to private school in seventh grade, but I was still left with a discomfort. Always doing my homework, always acting the part of the responsible first-born son, always getting the near-perfect grades and thus always drawing the attention of my teachers, I still stuck out in a troubling way.

This, I think, is why I later befriended Adrian, who began high school smoking pot and wearing dreads and ended it doing coke and wearing

gauge earrings. This is why I was drawn to my longtime girlfriend Katy, who told me stories about her acid flashbacks. This is why I made the odd decision, more than once, to do nitrous oxide on a high school friend's roof. This is why I made an absurd and ill-fated attempt to be a small-time drug dealer, which ended when two guys pulled a knife on me and stole \$400 I'd collected to buy a quarter-pound of marijuana.

Two of that four-hundred was not mine. Though my co-investors never forced me to repay them, losing other people's money made the run-in much more upsetting. It was a valuable wake-up call. I never sold another bag of pot, and soon thereafter stopped even buying it, but it didn't really end my fascination with doing bad, and befriending those who did.

Sometimes, "bad" deeds don't even have to violate my own value system for me to think of them as such. Smoking a joint, for example, if not selling one, seems pretty harmless. But the fascination for me has always been the moral codes of others, of family or community. Smoking a joint can still be an enjoyment, then, not just for what it is, but because it is "bad."

Adrian, like the other renegades I have befriended, has his own particular moral code. Though he respects my left-leaning politics and activism, he isn't even politically "moral" in the way I am. (He wouldn't cross a picket line to work, but he might commit other, lesser sins according to my politico-moral code—such as not voting.) Beyond politics, he is even more likely to thumb his nose at what passes for morality—fuck the Brown police and their cruisers, fuck the rich snobs in the old uptown neighborhood where he grew up, fuck you, fuck you, and fuck you too. It's a seductive attitude, particularly to someone who often struggles against a possibly genetic pull to do everything right.

Adrian is a great person, and I know a lot of other people who can see it in him. There is more to him, and to my interest in him, than that nose-thumbing at the world, which is as easy to look down at as it is to admire. His humor is world-renowned and ubiquitous, but he is compassionate, smart, and interesting. I didn't befriend Adrian solely out of attraction to badness, but to the extent that that was responsible, I'd call the attraction much more a blessing than a curse.

A certain amount of discomfort with my achievements, and my white male straight upper-middle-class privilege that helped me achieve them, is to thank for pulling me to various badasses in my life. If I were entirely comfortable with the person I am and have always been, I would never have shared a walk with Adrian along the Upper East Side drinking Steel Reserve. Then again, if he was fully comfortable with himself, neither would he.