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Essay

Short Timer

I still cringe when thinking of the summer from two years past. My mother would say, “I heard your friend James is interning with IBM, have you been looking anywhere?” I would walk past her without a response, heading toward the shower in my boxers at three in the afternoon. She would roll her eyes and mumble something under her breath, which I could never make out. Those long, mid day showers served as a safe space, a space where I could be alone with my thoughts.

 I often stood idly in the shower, wracking my brain and running through hypothetical situations, only to snap back to reality, wondering whether or not I had already washed my hair. I usually had not. Nonetheless, the numbing sensation of consistently hot water pouring on my upper back was a reminder that it isn’t beneficial to be *too* comfortable. I exited the shower and reentered into the frigid atmosphere of my upstairs bathroom. I tend to associate panic with being cold, as I dried off this feeling of panic morphed into guilt. My mother was right; I could no longer be useless, simply taking up space.

Living in Saratoga Springs is like living in Disney World, there is as much job opportunity as there is opportunity to vacation in leisure. Victorian style mansions, a vast downtown scene with rows of bars and restaurants, a horse racing track, two casinos, and an entire State Park with an outdoor Amphitheatre nudged in the middle, almost like it naturally grew there with the rest of the scenery. With all of these attractions, distractions rather, why work a day in your life at all? Might as well file for unemployment and join the party.

These thoughts of living an escapist lifestyle were quickly laid to rest by the realization that my life needed structure and my bank account needed a steady paycheck. After a week or so of rejections from restaurants and every mini golf course in the area, I finally received a call from a local landscaping business I had applied to. The man on the other end of the phone was awkward, choosing to speak in the most sudden of ways, frankly scaring the shit out of me. He often overcompensated with too many “Ums” and “Uh huhs”. That man over the phone was my boss Chris Mcburnie, the head honcho of the C&D Mcburnie Landcaping team. I was to start the following day and told not to be late, the truck leaves at 7:15 am sharp.

I always found comfort in my early morning drives to work. There was something indescribably beautiful about driving on backcountry roads. As angry as I was about getting to work by 7 am, I was always taken back by the scene of a rising orange sun peeking over the horizon and pouring onto the open road ahead of me. It made me feel lucky to be alive, and proud of myself for being conscious and somewhat awake at such an ungodly hour of the day. I’ve never been a morning person; this job was the first thing that ever disregarded my habit of sleeping in. There was no snoozing to the next set alarm when you’re a hard-nosed landscaper, it’s either get up and go to work or roll over and be jobless.

My morning commute took around twenty-five minutes, so on most days there was no time to rubberneck in awe at the sight of fog clearing over a misty field of cows and chickens. Still, I couldn’t help but enjoy an occasional glance at the rural scenery. I had to get from my house, Saratoga Springs, all the way to Schuylerville, which is two towns over. Schuylerville is a spacious farm town where neighbors are quarter miles apart, and they may possibly be outnumbered by the farm life that surrounds them. It is a small town/village that sits just past Saratoga Lake, a beautiful body of water that often compensated for the grueling workload I was forced to take on.

If I had to describe my first day on the job in one word, I would call it weird, very weird. I drove up to what Chris referred to as “the yard”, aka the place where he stores all of his shit, located off of County Rt. 687. I envisioned the yard being a large, industrious piece of land that neatly stored landscaping equipment in an orderly fashion. In reality, the yard was a small chunk of grass just over a sewer embankment that hugged the property line of a small one-story ranch owned by a woman who didn’t seem to mind that she lived hand in hand next to a landscaping company. As I parked my car along the other rows of cars by a line of trees facing the road, I remember being instantly ashamed that my car was the newest, and highest quality car out of all the others. My Jeep Cherokee was positioned in between a red GMC Envoy with rusted paint, and a shitty Nissan Altima circa 1998.

As much as I would typically be told I am overthinking something like this, people often get judged by the cars they drive. And if a twenty-year-old kid hops out of a 2009 Jeep Cherokee, odds are he didn’t purchase said vehicle himself. With potential clouds of judgment looming over me, I approached a crew of workers in the middle of loading shovels and hedge clippers into a Chevy Silverado. I looked up to find my boss Chris with his worn right hand reached out in my direction. He looked at me and said, “You Ryan aren’t ya?” as he shook my hand violently. My grip didn’t match the true dexterity of his side of the handshake. I was off to a rocky start. “Yeah, nice to meet you and thanks for the opportunity”, I said shakily.

Our eyes locked for a short amount of time, after some silence he replies “Well let’s not get gay with each other, head over to the shed and grab all the whackers and toss em in that truck over there.”

Chris was a tallish man in his late 40’s; he had a bald head of hair, with some brown stragglers that rallied on the sides of his head. Both of his ears contained a row of four mini hoop rings that were studded from the top to the bottom of his lobes. Every day he sported a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and brown boots. Whether the sky would dump rain all day long or hit us with hot rays of sun, Chris would dress no different. No raincoat or pair of shorts would ever find its way onto his person. Chris liked consistency and structure; I quickly found out how much he depended on routine in order to stay sane.

At the back end of the yard was a row of two sheds. The larger shed fit two large ride mowers, with its walls stuffed with shovels, hoes, weed whackers, hedge trimmers, shrub clippers, and tools I was unfamiliar with. I was surprised to find the smaller shed was filled with what appeared to be personal belongings. It was filled with books of all sorts, dressers, cabinets, and a large wooden canoe, almost like a personal storage unit. After doing my fair share of snooping around, I heard the roar of a truck engine behind me followed by a loud whistle that implied something along the lines of, “Hurry the fuck up and get in the truck.”

Every day we would take Chris’s Silverado to get to and from certain properties, which meant I was to be forever pressed in between Chris and the rest of the workers. My first day, I sat in the middle seat in the front, in between Chris and Joel on our way to the Schalamandre property. Whenever referring to the houses we were going to throughout the day, Chris solely referred to such places by the last name of the person paying him. He’d say things like, “Yeah we’re headin’ over to Butler today for a mulch job, and then we’ll swing by Edwards after that to finish cutting down those apple trees.”

 Joel was to be considered Chris’s right hand man. While we all got paid decently under the table, Joel was always paid the most as I came to find out every Friday on payday. Joel was older than Chris, in his 50’s. He was completely bald and he tanned like fresh salmon. His pinkish base very often became red throughout the course of the day; he was always angry at the unfortunate yet ordinary circumstances of landscaping in the summer time.

When it was unbearably hot outside while we’d mow our 15th property of the day, he’d look up at the sun and yell profanities in ways I never imagined possible. When it would unexpectedly rain while we were mulching garden beds, he would proclaim, “Fuck you rain gods for fucking up our mulch! This is bullshit”. There was always something and somebody to blame with Joel, and often times I was that somebody to blame. I wish I could say Joel and I had a love/hate relationship, but there was little love to be found.

I was a clueless, inexperienced kid who showed little progress throughout my first few weeks on the job. While Chris was more laidback, and happy I was even showing up, Joel would hold me accountable for every little detail of the job. If my lines weren’t dead straight while using the push mower along the edge of somebodies house, even somebodies trailer; he wouldn’t let me hear the end of it.

“See what you did there, you fucked it up! You short timed it!” he would yell. A short timer is something you did not want to be in the eyes of Joel. A short timer is someone who does a shitty job on a property, and does it not because of their lack of ability or experience, but because they are lazy. At times, he had the right to call me a short timer, most times however, he was just being a prick. I never let Joel’s criticism really get to me; there was no point of letting him get under my skin. Joel’s anger stemmed from the shitty circumstances of his own life, he and I both knew it. When we weren’t arguing, I couldn’t hear the end of his messy divorce story. In summary, his wife left him and took his only daughter with her to Tennessee, leaving his only contact with them both in the form of child support checks, which he struggled to pay on a monthly basis.

Knowing so much about Joel’s personal life, along with my general disdain for his personality, led me to constantly judge him. I was raised to always see the good in others, but there was not much to be desired regarding Joel’s moral compass. I never though much of his character until the day him and I were assigned by Chris to go to a property and plant large pine trees in a women’s backyard. She was an older, heavyset woman who I presumed lived alone. She was a sweet women, she wore a yellow sundress that had seen its fair share of summers but continued to stick around for her. She made us lemonade and even tried to tip us when we finished the job. It took us two days to complete, more than enough time to gather judgment. I had to hide my disgust whenever Joel referred to her as a “fat pig”, who he claimed he would “still give it to” had he been a few drinks deep. I’ll never forget when we finally finished planting the trees, Joel unzipped his khaki shorts and pissed all over them before we left.

The only time Joel and I ever got along was when we would get high together. I discovered during my first week on the job that Chris often had to leave the properties we were working at for an hour or so at a time to go get more mulch or to work on other properties solo. The first time I witnessed Chris voyage off, I was ordered by Joel to follow him around back of the house we were mulching. He led me into the shade underneath a deck and started rifling through his backpack.

My initial thought was that he was fishing for a pocketknife, for which he would cut me up and sprinkle my remains throughout the uncharted woods beyond the property. As I mentally prepared for my life to end prematurely, Joel whipped out a glass bowl and began to neatly pack it with weed.

“You get high?”

“From time to time. Does Chris care if we smoke on the job?” I replied.

“If he catches us were both canned no question. Just keep your shades on when he gets back and don’t short time anything.”

That was a promise I couldn’t have kept, but the option of being high and slightly enjoying myself while on the job was too enticing. My smoke sessions with Joel were nothing similar to what getting high in the movies looked like. There was no montage of us slowly exhaling smoke while classic rock played in the background. When Joel and I got high, it was rapid-fire smoking. It was a paranoid sequence of passing the bowl back and fourth quickly to each other while sketchily looking at the edge of the driveway for Chris’s Chevy to arrive. I had about 15 seconds tops to get my hit before Joel would bark at me to pass it back to him. Our sessions were so intense and fast paced that it made the idea of getting high on the job barely worth it. “Let’s go! Rip it, rip it rip it! Hurry the fuck up!” He would yell.

We would literally fire off 4 bowl packs in the span of 5 minutes. I would be morbidly high for the remainder of the day, as well as significantly worse at my job. When the time came that Chris returned with more yards of mulch, I always panicked at the thought of him catching me being stoned. There I would be on my hands and knees, moving around the same pile of mulch back and forth, making the garden bed worse off than it was prior to my effort. Regardless of how productive I was, I learned that the key was to appear busy when Chris was around, and kill time when he wasn’t.

I also learned early on the job that my co-workers had absolutely zero problem letting me in on their dark past, and even darker present. It was a combination of them lacking basic social cues, and them also not giving a fuck. Pete, one of the workers who showed up sporadically, once gave me thorough detail of his three separate encounters with DUI checkpoints, all of which he failed to pass. Joel once gloated to me about a time he did coke with the drummer from Avenge Sevenfold in a bathroom bar in Lake George. Plain and simple, my coworkers were a bit crazy.

 While Joel and the others had their moments of rambling, Chris was a totally different story when it came to telling me things I could have gone without knowing. I remember one day in early June, I was barely two weeks into the job and Chris took me on a ride to Seasons, a mulch supply store. Chris would normally bullshit over just about anything under the sun, from shitty DVDs he had lying around his house, to the time he fucked one of his female clients right after he had finished building a brick wall in her back yard. On this day, after going on and on about mulch pricing, he said something really dark.

“Hey, you know how many bullets you need in your shotgun?” he said.

“Um, not too sure. How many Chris?” I replied.

“One. Just one bullet to blow your fucking brains out. That’s all it takes.”

Completely thrown off guard, I had no response. At this point all I could hear was the faint sound of the radio of his truck, which always played the Skidmore College radio station, and the sound of wind whipping past me. While it may have only been an implication, or a sick joke, I couldn’t help but wonder if Chris actually ever did try to kill himself. Initially, his dark outlook on life made me angry because I was unable to understand where it was coming from.

A few weeks later, I discovered the direct cause for Chris’s demeanor, it all stemmed from deep-rooted family tension. I still remember the exact date, June 22nd, 2015. On this day, I essentially assisted Chris with a heist at his Mother’s home.

It was a Monday; I pulled into the yard to see a large wooden trailer hitched to the back of Chris’s truck. This trailer was much larger than the metal ones we typically used to transport ride mowers to and from properties, so I was confused as to its purpose. I approached the truck to find Chris sitting in the drivers seat with the engine running.

“Your coming with me today, got a personal thing to take care of.”

“Oh okay, where we headed?” I replied.

“My mother’s house. Get in the car I’ll explain on the way.”

I got into the truck and didn’t ask another question. It was a 30-minute drive out to his mother’s house in a town called Galway. He told me that a few years back, his father in law passed away. In the will, this house was to be given to Chris after his father in law had passed, and his mother denied Chris what was rightfully his. That was the story from his perspective, and I did not know anymore context beyond his side of the story. All I did know was that Chris grabbed me as an extra hand to help him take all of the belongings in this house. I was unsure whether or not he was allowed to be doing this, or if his mother knew we were even showing up.

We pulled up to a white, two-story house with an open garage attached to its left side. The garage was stuffed to the brim with tons of household essentials. We took anything and everything. Dining room tables, couches, a love seat, boxes of fine china and silverware, chairs, etc. Chris even had me take a kayak off of the garage wall and toss it in the trailer. Meanwhile, his mother stood there still as a statue. She was old and frail, her white hair was thinning and she was very soft spoken. She appeared anxious whenever Chris walked by her, filling his trailer with her stuff. I recall that as Chris and I went back and forth, loading the trailer, she would quietly utter things like “Chris are you sure you need that?” or “Wait I still use that.” She gave off a vibe that she knew she didn’t have the right to stop Chris from what he was doing, but I could tell she was still broken.

The exchanges between Chris and his mother were halfhearted and artificial. His replies were often one worded; the two never seemed to make eye contact. The tension was thick and disheartening, I didn’t know whether to feel bad about their broken relationship, or guilty that I was helping out in stripping her of her belongings under the boss’s orders. After taking a lion’s share of her stuff, we got back into his truck and drove off. I was unable to process a true emotion at this point in time, just numbness. After some silence, Chris reached for his pocket and took out a fifty-dollar bill.

“Here ya go. Appreciate the help.”

“I can’t take this, really it’s okay.”

“Listen you did me a solid, you can take it or leave it.” He replied.

I took the fifty-dollar bill and shamefully stuffed it in my pocket. Accepting money as a tip for assisting in taking belongings from an old woman who I didn’t even know made me feel disgusting. Even though I was unsure of whether or not Chris’s mother was in the wrong, I still felt horrible. Who was I to stand on a moral high ground, silently judging *them*? I was no better. I was numb.

This numbness was constantly fueled and gradually intensified throughout these summer days. It was mostly due to the consistently off-putting conversation between my boss and other coworkers that I would to tune into on a daily basis. Whether it was the nonstop diatribe over Obama ruining the country, or the playfully aggressive banter between Joel and Chris about wanting to bend over and fuck every female jogger that ran past our fast moving truck. The conversations lacked any sort of coherence and defied virtually all aspects of common decency.

I came to work everyday to move mulch, cut lawns, and go home. It had gotten to a point where the mental aspect of the job was becoming more taxing than the physical labor itself. Not to say that I wasn’t completely gassed following a twelve-hour day of landscaping, but my change in perspective suffered worse than my sore body. Those drives to and from work became less tranquil. I began to lose interest in the vastness of the farmland and infinite cornfields that seemed to run to the edge of the descending sun’s horizon. I would normally appreciate the serene summer environment, or at least notice it. To this day I still struggle to truly grasp what exactly I took away from my time landscaping. Some days were rewarding and quite fulfilling, other days left me questioning my character and ability to cope with emotions. At times I felt like I couldn’t relate to my coworkers on a certain level, other times I found myself right in the mix, laughing at their offensive jokes, almost like I was one of them.