

Workaround

Ventura Community College had a huge campus. It was the only area mid-town with buildings taller than two stories. I returned to my home city from college after an incident destroyed three years of my life at Sierra Nevada College, Incline Village, Nevada. There, I used to manage multiple jobs: front desk librarian, an editor for the school's litmag, and everything under the sun involving the English Department; including accounting. I was the only student-editor with a male partner. No one knew of this until a colleague asked. I wouldn't've said so otherwise.

That was still a mistake. It led to the incident, which occurred in the posh Campbell-Freeman dormitory suite on the third floor. He tried to show me a magazine dedicated to cross-dressing transsexuals. I didn't give a shit. I didn't even want to parse the phrase 'cross-dressing transsexuals'. I was always wary of actors and performers in every connotation of those words. That night only vindicated my wariness.

I used to volunteer at the Presbyterian Thrift Store in Incline Village, where a kind elderly woman taught me to discern crystalline wine glasses from simpler cups.

It's easy to do. You just gotta know it's a thing to be done. It's funny how opportunities splay themselves before you like that, but you assume they're just visual white noise: something innocuous or so interwoven into the world's connective tissue that it could never be unraveled.

But it's there. It's a ball of yarn with a hidden thread.

I'd buy up a few crystallines, then resell them for one-hundred percent markups after cussing out morons for trying to dump their rich-oid junk on us. We set out a sign saying donations were off earlier. We were full, plain as day. The old women and I were opening boxes and sorting shirts and doilies and tossed out purple-heart medals like clockwork. Stressed mothers ignored their miasmas of toddlers as they smashed plastic trucks like otters do with stones and mussels. I yelled at them too.

Some cumhead moved the sign and dumped garbage bags of ski equipment on us anyhow.

Back at the Community College, I made the mistake of trying to salvage my education to ease the worries of my family. Due to a lack of clerical cohesion, I was allowed to skip SNC's English 101. I already progressed through advanced literature courses, capstones, and critical theory, but they wouldn't hear it.

Community Colleges are sad places. Particularly, Ventura Comm. was sad, but beautiful. The cafeteria used to have arcade cabinets dedicated to Street Fighter 3: Third Strike and Virtual On. Every building was flanked with shrubberies and flowers, and the biology garden was so massive they begged for yard workers. They even offered pay. Despite this, no one wanted to be there.

The professors were crotchety, smug, and made no illusions when it came to chewing your ear off with personal anecdotes and neuroses, even when it interfered with coursework or they were wrong.

There was once an obese Spanish Prof. who told our class a dreary tale: she didn't accept others delivering student assignments for them because, one time, someone's aunt crashed their car and died while said student was in the hospital. She

said this as if it were a logical proof. She was a spiteful moron. If she had the grapes to work for a university, she'd be a spiteful moron with a slightly higher salary, and she'd still make less than a roadworker.

The students of Ventura Comm. tended to be overgrown high school students. They were despondent and self-destructive as most post-teens were when forced to attend giant concrete blocks attempting to socialize them into employability while also coddling them enough to receive funding: a meritocracy with stab-proof pens.

Keep in mind these people weren't teens. They weren't forced to come (ideally). They're just uncertain of where to dump their energies, so they tended to channel them into unrooted passions and kooky ideologies, which was easier than accepting that you will be judged - both justly and unjustly - for your deeds in life.

I was a student too. I joined out of guilt, as previously stated. I switched from a Biology Major to English Literature because I got lucky and published a few poems and stories.

I ate a PB&J sandwich in front of English 101, waiting for class. Other students stood nearby. A man bloviated to a woman about how he's vegetarian and goes to Fresh and Easy, that he subsides entirely on expensive shakes of dubious quality.

"All you have to do is put some effort into yourself." He said to her, then leered at me.

I smacked my lips and kept eating.

Still before class: I had to piss. I crossed the hall toward a bathroom. This was the only indoor facility I saw in a school since moving to California. The bone-white walls were amplified by overhead white-blue fluorescent tubes spraying eye-sanitizer everywhere. The school's designers must've taken notes from old dungeon crawler games, because the checkered floor was the only semblance of measurable distance.

A throng of small women jabbered something at me like macaques.

"What was that?" I asked.

They laughed.

I felt bad for Prof. Johnson. The vegetarian from before was among many students who couldn't discern a fact statement from an opinion one. We're talking strictly about grammar here.

"'Abraham Lincoln was born in 1968.' Is this a fact or opinion statement?" Prof. Johnson asked.

People were either stumped, didn't care, or were former feigning the latter.

"What about this one: 'I think Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809.'"

Someone raised his hand. He said it was a factual statement. Prof. Johnson restrained a sigh. She directed everyone to re-read two paragraphs from a workbook for another five minutes.

"Bullshit. It's a fact, though," the student muttered.

After class, I hopped a bus to Westinghouse Street and went back to my part-time gig: a scanner for Assisted Home Care and Hospice. It was an excellent job. All I had to do was digitize a garage filled with thousands of medical records. The contents of a single file could be anywhere between five to three-thousand pages. What was consistent: my drop-scanner jammed every ten-to-thirty seconds. It screeched. I pried the staples and paper clips and re-aligned the papers. It jammed again soon after. Rinse and repeat.

Aside from creating an easy reference for file names, I didn't have to do anything. This gave me time to read, doodle, and watch Space Ghost: Coast to Coast on my phone. I did this all between files and paper jams. Temporarily, my slow reading speed spiked, as if to compensate for constant interruption. I blew through Xenophon so dang fast.

Twenty-eight of the thirty-two staff in the office were women. They also worked in their own shared rooms. I was the garage goblin they visited while going out to grab water bottles. They always complimented me. It made me feel sleazy when this was such a simple job. Some of them used me as a confessional to talk shit about co-workers. I never tattled. The last thing I wanted was to get sucked into workplace drama or worse: play messenger for aggressive parties. I've seen kids under divorced parents. I was one (albeit being better off than others). There's no reason to take on unneeded stress.

"You're our only scanner who does their job." Chris Cortez, the office manager, once said.

"All I do is drop paper in a slot." I said.

"The last four temp hires didn't scan anything. They just watched movies."

"I watch movies while filing."

"You still work."

"Sometimes it's fun to read those bits of the human condition as they flash by on-screen."

"What?"

"The nursing records. Health checkup reports. Sometimes I parse them. You can see how people change toward the end of their lives; how the nurses report their fixations on certain subjects, whether or how often their families visit. Sometimes, it gets too macabre."

"That's the reality of healthcare."

"It's humbling."

Cortez nodded, then asked if I knew anything about copiers. I lied and said yes. I did the same thing as a Front Desk Librarian. The industrial printer-copier had the same layout of plastic shelves and drawers as the one at SNC. I fiddled with it, then fixed it.

Ventura Community College had an amazing biology garden. The bio students had their own small wing at the edge of the campus, shaded under a canopy of trees and tall bamboo throngs. There were walkways and quaint bridges leading over a bleach-scented pond. If you didn't feel for those showier attractions, the back area had a plot of grass and a picnic table. People rarely went there. Between classes, I'd sleep in the sun or read Russian sci-fi novellas.

There, a butterfly once landed on my face. I extended my hand. It avoided me impishly. Only when the bug's presence faded from my mind, and I nearly drifted back to sleep, would it

return. If I extended my hand it avoided me like a child playing tag. It stayed on me until I stirred again.

English 101. Prof. Johnson asked if we did the homework. She already knew the answer. We did our homework over an online program. We were given short stories to read, then quizzes of their contents. The UI was round, blue, and shined like playground plastic. It reminded me of JumpStart games I used to play as a child on a Windows 95 in a Minnesotan basement.

Few people did the homework. Prof. Johnson knew this because results were submitted to her through the program. She hissed through her nose, then recomposed and faux-cheerily said: "I'm glad I'm retiring this semester."

Stray classroom chatter drowned her out. It felt like I was the only person who heard her say that, even though she spoke plainly in front of the whole class.

The pangs of reluctance I suffered when thinking of continuing school were vindicated more and more as time passed, eroding the calcified husk of already-weakened optimism.

The rest of that class session: people gave reports on a book of their choosing. You could write a two-page paper or opt for a short presentation. My desk neighbor and I both read John Kennedy Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces*. We chatted about Ignatius P. Reilly being the epitome of undisciplined intellect. The desk neighbor, Mike, said his dad gave it to him as a kid, to teach him to never be like Ignatius. I said I'd drink with his dad. I rarely ever drank.

Someone did a presentation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. We witnessed the early signs of the video essay

format, except it was a merciful two minutes instead of seven hours of prattling.

"-He said God is Dead. It's a very misunderstood phrase," the presenter said. He had thick rimmed glasses and slouched. His bangs hung over his left eye. He fiddled with his smartphone a lot. The vegetarian guy was friends with him, and claimed he was an excellent graphic designer and talked about jailbreaking as if it were wizardry.

The bell rang. Class was dismissed. I apologized to Prof. Johnson to express condolences. I wasn't entirely sure why but felt the range of reasons tightening to a semiotic knot. I felt bad for her. I really did. She was an unremarkable professor in that she thoroughly taught her lessons and drilled her students, which is more than I can say for the quirky, despondent, alcoholic 'geniuses' clogging the comm. college's Humanities department (at the time of 2014).

"Why did you take this class? You seem too old and... concentrated for it?" she asked.

"Concentrated?" I asked.

"I mean you try."

"I like reading sometimes. Taking an intro class at least helped me re-learn concepts from a different point of view. Keeps my brain elastic."

"You really think so?"

"Maybe. I want to make the best of things. I was published a few times, back when I was in Nevada."

"And you came here?"

"Some visiting adjunct tried to molest me. The school didn't like that. He was a flamboyant type, you know? They didn't want it to look bad on the whole... liberal arts thing."

"That's horrible."

"I didn't let him do anything, and he was very drunk. I elbowed him across the face when he grabbed at me. It was a knee-jerk reaction."

She cried.

I never saw her again.

I didn't sign up for another semester at Ventura Comm. I was still registered as a student until the system cut me out. Until then, I took up another job landscaping for the bio garden. I drove a golf cart full of equipment and earned ten dollars an hour. The manager was pleased I even showed up. I raked leaves and watered plants.

Once, I was sent to clean out hay sheds with a hose. Someone was hotboxing the place with a pipe full of weed. I sprayed him with the hose, then hid as he kicked the gate open and stormed out from the billowing smoke like a cowboy from a vaudeville bar fight. He mumbled something, then went to a three-hour lab session with glazed eyes.

Another day, some kids were playing hooky from a tiny set of portable buildings called El Camino High. They hung around the picnic table while I hosed off cement walkways. I didn't care until one of them said I looked like Napoleon Dynamite. I sprayed him with the hose.

"I have a phone, you fucking faggot! You ruined it," one of the kids said.

"Did I?" I asked.

His groupies muttered worriedly.

"Show me. Take out the phone and turn it on."

He did. It worked just fine.

He sheathed his phone. I sprayed him again. The kiddies left.

I was fired for that, so I turned my attention back to Assisted's temp-job. It lasted me over three years, full time, until the backlog of records was completely digitized. I was laid off after that. The garage I worked in was 'dozed and replaced with more offices. They never hired me for any other job despite chatting me up whenever I stopped by. Most of the employees didn't bother with college at all.

Sometimes things work out, especially when you try.