

Liberal Arts Degrees and Lobster Tanks: A Lesson in Stopping to Smell the Fishy Roses

Up until the summer of my sophomore year at college, the idea that there were people in the world who looked down on the liberal arts degree seemed outlandish to me, an impossible concept of which I'd heard rumors about, certainly, but like sasquatches or the Loch Ness Monster, had never personally glimpsed. I'd read plenty of stories, of course, about these alleged naysayers. I'd seen them depicted in movies, leering down at optimistic, artistic protagonists and sneering the famous line, "But what will you *do* once you graduate?" Never, though, had I actually met someone like this in my day-to-day life. Never, that is, until I got a job at the local fish market.

It was there that I worked with Noah, a fifty-year old with several chins, eyes set as far apart as a starfish's, and arterial problems he'd been hospitalized for twice already. He smoked cigarettes on the hour and regularly indulged in Big Macs. On slow days, he liked to pace around the store during lunch, flecks of hamburger getting caught in his foamy moustache as he railed against the uselessness of higher education.

"This is what sixty grand at culinary school gets you," he told me on one of those particularly hot July afternoons where even the flies get tired of buzzing in their windowsills. "Ten bucks an hour and a whole bunch of dead fish."

I was dressed in an apron stained with lobster guts, dragging a mop across the floor in aimless circles. The lobster tank at the front of the store gurgled meekly, like a lung struggling with pneumonia. I saw the cluttered movement of crustaceans within it, struggling to crawl atop one another, their antennae just barely breaking the surface.

“You go to school, right?” Noah said. “What major are you throwing your money away for?”

“Creative Writing,” I said, my voice snagging on itself. I didn’t know why, but I felt a heated rush of embarrassment at this admission.

Noah stuffed the last bite of big mac in his mouth. “Bet that really helps with the lobsters,” he said between pensive chews.

I stared at the fish behind the display case’s smeared glass: cuts of bruised-white haddock, slabs of washed-out salmon, swordfish steaks gone cloudy and grey. I tried to think of some book to quote, a literary passage to raise in defense, but I couldn’t stop thinking about these fish, the iced graveyard of them.

“So you’re going to teach, I imagine,” he continued dryly. “You’re going to do something a little cleaner than this fish market shit.”

As a matter of fact, I’d gone to college with the vague intention of being a writer—whatever that entailed. Until this moment, I’d imagined it as a collage of stereotypical images: mahogany desks, old typewriters, smoke swirling from black coffee. Now I felt suddenly, impossibly naïve, shortsighted and spoiled with academia. My world seemed cloistered, narrow. I was reading *Moby Dick* between shifts at work, and the idea of this—of spending pristine summer days slogging through pages and pages of old text—seemed laughable before Noah and his tired cynicism. After all, how was I supposed to explain to a man who had trouble getting through a motorcycle magazine article the importance of Melville’s white, unknowable whale? How could I express the value of words and literary analysis to someone who lived in a trailer and thought cable television was the peak of human innovation?

It was my first time feeling shame, acute and sharpened to the point of regret. It seemed absurd that I'd spent thousands of dollars just to discuss Shakespeare in stuffy classrooms when people like Noah existed, people struggling just to pay off their last heart surgery, people with nothing more to look forward to each morning than tattered fish husks and sad lobster gurgles.

I was having a lot of these "first ever" experiences since I'd started working with seafood. My first time smelling the ammonia-reek of a dead lobster. My first set of blisters, clinging tenaciously as barnacles to my fingers. And now this, my first time feeling like a true ass, a gawky, bespectacled, middle-class kid who knew suffering only from its textbook definition.

Noah went outside to smoke. I walked over to the lobster tank and hunched to its level. Past the reflection of my face, past the water's swirling miasma of bubbles, I saw the dark forms of pacing lobsters. I still had another seven hours to go with my shift. People would come and go, buy food, exchange money. For a moment I thought vaguely about feeling like a cog in a machine, the old stereotype, but even that description seemed self-indulgent in its easiness. My self-pity, too, seemed simplistic, out of place. I was only perpetuating Noah's jaded view, not solving the questions it raised.

I reached into the tank, grimaced against its cold as I fumbled for a lobster like an epiphany. The very fact that I could appreciate Noah's perspective, that I could put aside my own beliefs long enough to share the stagnancy of his, was proof that, at some level, no matter how microscopic, all those hours in the classroom were paying off. I began loading lobsters into a stainless steel tray, a batch to cook up for the customers that would come later.

The liberal arts degree, I told myself, was a degree in slowing down. A degree of reflection, of winding contemplation. It did not sell fish or fix clogged arteries. In that moment, though, despite the minimum hourly wage I was making, despite Noah's comments lingering like a cold weight along the hairs of my neck, my degree was making me look at the crammed tray of lobsters. It was making me pause.

These crustaceans were brainless, vacant cockroaches of the deep sea, another chore standing between me and cashing out. Still they persisted, dark shapes scuttling along underwater sand dunes, along continental shelves sunken centuries ago, inching through miles and miles of pitch-black, pressurized darkness. There was a beauty in this, I felt. Noah would laugh at me if I told him this, and I would understand why he was laughing.

Nevertheless, it seemed important, this beauty. Not just that it existed, but that I was lucky enough to see it now, in the dead-heat of what otherwise would've been a wasted day behind a cash register.

If nothing else, we need to slow down sometimes. We need to stop and simply *think*. It had taken me sixty credits and a hefty series of loans, but I could say, now, that I'd learned something too few people are ever taught: stop to smell the roses. Pause and consider. It seems laughably simple, even too easy, but it's a truth I only ever found in the midst of a liberal arts education: even if it's only to watch a lobster's blind scuttling, we should never stop pausing to contemplate this world around us.