The Whirlpool

My mom and I are on our patio, talking by the pool. It’s another quiet day in the suburbs; the only sound is our conversation and splashing water. I’m home from my first semester at Duke with time to reflect. I tell her I’m thinking about going for a concentration in aerospace engineering.

“Oh, that’s great!” She says. “My cousin Sheryl works for Raytheon - she could definitely help you out.”

The path forward looks clear: keep studying, try for an internship at Raytheon, and maybe it will turn into a job offer.

Honestly, I couldn’t care less about Raytheon; I was drawn to aerospace because of Formula 1. I dreamed of working for McLaren, designing rockets in the form of a car. I wanted to be a part of the high-stakes world of F1, solving million-dollar design problems and traveling across the world.

But, Raytheon seemed like the pragmatic choice. Many aerospace seniors at Duke were going to work for Boeing and Lockheed - even more prestigious if in their military divisions.

My mom leans in and tells me of the fabled Raytheon testing site in Australia where Sheryl works - an area for classified projects. My mom, a hint of pride in her voice, says that all of Sheryl’s work requires high-security clearance from the Department of Defense; she can’t even talk about her work because she had to sign NDA’s!

It seemed like my world was narrowing down. I felt like I was being pushed prematurely onto a career path, into the defense sector pipeline. I wasn’t ecstatic at the idea of designing missiles or warplanes, and I soon soured on the idea of studying aerospace. The foundations for my future crumbled beneath my feet with nothing to replace it. With little direction for my future and all the pressure to figure it out, I felt lost.

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After my next semester, I stopped taking mechanical engineering courses. Going into my Sophomore year, I started to step into the computer science major; it seemed perfect for someone who had no idea what they wanted to do.

It soon became clear that I was late to the party. There was a schedule to be kept: intern at a small startup Sophomore summer, beef up the resume, apply to the FAANG's - Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, or Google - junior summer, get a return offer, and start your career.

With an offer from one of the FAANG’s, you were made. Software engineers make up to $1,000,000 per year, get stock options, have rock-solid job security, and most importantly, become credentialed. It’s a way to make a better life for yourself and your family, a way to gain respect in the eyes of your peers, and a way to open the door to better jobs. It’s a golden ticket. I thought I had left the whirlpool of pre-professionalism, but I realized that I had dropped myself back in the middle of it.

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My reluctance towards Big Tech mostly comes not from what they do but what they don’t do. While some projects are overtly oppressive, such as surveillance technology on Amazon warehouse workers, most work - like creating a dashboard for companies to monitor their investments - seems benign. But huge tech firms have a gravity that pulls in talent, talent that could be better spent on almost any other project. Projects like creating platforms for local banking that keep money in the community or programs that enable decentralized farming that lessens food insecurity. While work like this exists, it’s been hard to find. It has seemed like the exception and not the norm.

Even when the work is helpful, it can be insidious. A lot of computer science work is automation - automating away menial or dangerous work to free up time for more fulfilling things. When there are blue skies, I can see a world in which people no longer have to work for a living, thanks to automation. But just as the atom was not split in a moral vacuum, automation doesn’t happen independent of our society. Without an automation tax, money saved on labor is funneled disproportionately to those with power, while the laborers are the ones left out to dry.

According to the work of Oxford Economist Robert Allen, in mid-19th century England, the country was undergoing a metamorphosis spurred by industrialization. In the shock of this change, productivity and per capita income rose. At the same time, real wages stagnated, and the gains realized from development overwhelmingly found their way into the hands of the capitalists, deepening inequality.

Automation, without an automation tax, can lead to income polarization and worsening inequality.

It feels like all of the jobs that bring personal security will come at the cost of public welfare. Deep down, I’m terrified that I won’t be strong enough. I don’t know if I will resist the pull of the vortex: the life of comfort and insulation that wealth affords, the distance that allows you to ignore the ills of society - or at least be numb to it.

Sometimes I think to myself,

“Maybe I’ll just do it for a few years. In and out.”

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I’m laying on my back in a clearing on the edge of Duke University’s forest. It’s halfway through my Junior spring semester - the main cycle for computer science summer internship interviews has just ended. I’ve tried - unsuccessfully - to ignore the rush for internships around me.

Sandy Moser, a Junior studying civil engineering, and I are laughing about the job postings we’ve seen on Handshake. Our inboxes are filled with recruiters from tech firms, banks, consulting groups, and private equity companies.

“When I scroll through Handshake, I feel like throwing up,” said Sandy.

It feels weird to her to be reduced to a career path, to a hirable prospect. She’s not ready to think about her career, yet she’s reaching a time where she feels that she has no option but to.

But not everyone feels that way. Aly Manjee, a Sophomore studying Economics, is actively trying to be recruited by a private equity firm.

He says that he wants to break the generational cycle of being in want of more. Growing up around his affluent friends, he’s seen their different relationship with money. How they drift towards “softer” majors; ones that are fulfilling and moral. He chose his major because of the money he could make.

“It’s a selfish thing, but the world is a selfish place. Some people say that you lose the forest in the trees - but I’m not looking at the forest,” said Aly.

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When I was in grade school, my parents told me that they would pay for whatever college I got into. They would give me a head start in life, debt-free with a college education.

“I just want for you to be happy and self-sufficient, Alex,” says my mom.

Recently, she’s been worried that I’m being too idealistic. With what I want out of a job, she’s worried that I won’t be able to find one at all.

With the time and space bought by my family’s wealth, I have the added privilege to consider less traditional career paths. I don’t have to try and make enough money to pull my family out of economic hardship; they’ve done that for themselves. I know that if everything goes terribly, I’ll be caught by my family’s safety net.

But I’m prideful. I don’t want to rely on my family. I want my parents to be proud of me for being self-sufficient.

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This summer, I’m doing research on social equity and coding for a criminal justice nonprofit. I’m living in Durham with a friend, splitting the rent. With the high cost of housing and a small stipend, I’ll have enough to cover rent but maybe not food.

I found a contract job through my sister, who is working at a pharmaceutical consulting company in her gap year before applying for medical school. Originally, her company hired two computer science Ph.D.’s to automate some of their work, saving analysts about 15 hours a week. But when they backed out, my sister asked me if I could do it, and I inherited the contract.

The job is simple: I write a script that compiles new information and sends emails that alert pharmaceutical companies about their competitor’s progress. And I’ll be overpaid. For about 20 hours of work, I’ll be making more than I will at my two summer internships.

I hope I find a job that is fulfilling and allows me to be comfortable. I hope the job directly helps people and isn’t middling. I hope that I don’t slide down the slippery slope of greed and allow my passion to wane.

I feel like I’ll soon be faced with an impossible decision, a decision that I’ll regret either way. I either fight the pull of the whirlpool or allow myself to be dragged in.

(1490)

Sources

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Lana Kumar (Mom):

Phone: 941-822-7925

Sandy Moser (Friend):

Phone: 614-397-2525

Aly Manjee (Preprofessional):

Phone: 617-637-3993

Fact Check

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