Troubled

A MEMOIR OF FOSTER CARE,
FAMILY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

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For Carmen L.H.J.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Luxury Beliefs

My childhood habit of visiting school libraries had not abated. I came to Yale to major in psychology, but my generative curiosity soon overflowed the boundaries of my degree. In my attempt to understand class distinctions, I spent a lot of time thinking and reading about class divides and social hierarchies and compared what I'd learned with my experiences on campus. Gradually, I developed the concept of "luxury beliefs," which are ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class at very little cost, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes. The upper class includes (but is not necessarily limited to) anyone who attends or graduates from an elite college and has at least one parent who is a college graduate. Research has found that parental educational attainment is the most important objective indicator of

social class.[1] This is because, compared with parental income, parental education is a more powerful predictor of a child's future lifestyle, tastes, and opinions.[2] In 2021, more than 80 percent of Ivy League students had parents with college degrees.[3]

It is a vexing question whether first-generation college graduates can truly enter the upper class. Paul Fussell—the social critic and author of *Class*—wrote that manners, tastes, opinions, and conversational style are just as important for upper-class membership as money or credentials, and that to fulfill these requirements, you have to be immersed in affluence from birth. Likewise, the twentieth-century French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu stated that a "triadic structure" of schooling, language, and taste was necessary to be accepted among the upper class. Bourdieu described the mastery of this triad as "ease." When you grow up in a social class, you come to embody it. You represent its tastes and values so deeply that you exhibit "ease" within it.[4] This is one reason why, even among graduates of elite universities, parental social class predicts income and occupational prestige. People with parents who are college graduates are often better

1 P. K. Piff, "Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement, and Narcissism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40 (2014): 34–43.

2 J. A. Davis, "Achievement Variables and Class Cultures: Family, Schooling, Job and Forty-Nine Dependent Variables in the Cumulative GSS," in D. B. Grusky, ed., *Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, 439–457 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

3 "Share of first-generation students in Ivy League schools in the Class of 2026," Statista, October 25, 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/940593/ivy-league-share-first-generation-students-class.

4 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

equipped to gain and maintain status—they tend to be more adept at navigating organizations, smoothly interacting with colleagues, and positioning themselves for advancement.[5] Consistent with this, in 2021 the Pew Research Center found that among households headed by a college graduate, the median wealth of those who have a parent with at least a bachelor's degree was nearly $100,000 greater than those who don't have college-educated parents.[6] This bonus of being a "continuing-generation" (as opposed to a "first-generation") college graduate has been termed the "parent premium."

I don't have the parent premium. For extended periods of my youth, I had the opposite.

It's impossible to say that every individual in a particular class or category has the exact same features across the board. Still, graduates of elite universities generally occupy the top quintile of income, often wield outsized social influence, and are disproportionately likely to hold luxury beliefs that undermine social mobility.

For example, a former classmate at Yale told me "monogamy is kind of outdated" and not good for society. I asked her what her background is and if she planned to marry. She said she came from an affluent family, was raised by both of her parents, and that, yes, she personally intended to have a monogamous marriage—but quickly added that marriage shouldn't have to be for everyone. She was raised in a stable two-parent family, just like the vast majority of

5 L. A. Rivera, *Pedigree* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

6 R. Fry, "First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes," Pew Research Center, May 18, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/18/first-generation-college-graduates-lag-behind-their-peers-on-key-economic-outcomes/.

our classmates. And she planned on getting married herself. But she insisted that traditional families are old-fashioned and that society should "evolve" beyond them.

My classmate's promotion of one ideal ("monogamy is outdated") while living by another ("I plan to get married") was echoed by other students in different ways. Some would, for instance, tell me about the admiration they had for the military, or how trade schools were just as respectable as college, or how college was not necessary to be successful. But when I asked them if they would encourage their own children to enlist or become a plumber or an electrician rather than apply to college, they would demur or change the subject.

Later, I would connect my observations to stories I read about tech tycoons, another affluent group, who encourage people to use addictive devices, while simultaneously enforcing rigid rules at home about technology use. For example, Steve Jobs prohibited his children from using iPads. Parents in Silicon Valley reportedly tell their nannies to closely monitor how much their children use their smartphones.[7] Chip and Joanna Gaines are well-known home improvement TV personalities who have their own television network. They don't allow their children to watch TV and don't own a television.[8] Don't get high on your own supply, I guess. Many affluent people now

7 B. Montgomery, "Tech's Rich and Powerful Are So Over Their Gadgets," *Daily Beast*, December 26, 2019, https://www.thedailybeast.com/techs-rich-and-powerful-are-so-over-their-gadgets.

8 J. Juneau, "Joanna Gaines Talks Kids' Screen Time and Says She and Chip 'Don't Have a TV' in Their House," *People*, February 12, 2019, https://people.com/parents/joanna-gaines-doesnt-have-tv-kids-ipad-rules-southern-living/.

promote lifestyles that are harmful to the less fortunate. Meanwhile, they are not only insulated from the fallout; they often profit from it.

Gradually, I would learn the tastes and values of the group that I had not fully joined. I managed to piece together the luxury beliefs concept from my observations and readings to understand what I was seeing. In the past, people displayed their membership in the upper class with their material accoutrements. But today, luxury goods are more accessible than before. This is a problem for the affluent, who still want to broadcast their high social position. But they have come up with a clever solution. The affluent have decoupled social status from goods and reattached it to beliefs.

Human beings become more preoccupied with social status once our physical needs are met. In fact, research has revealed that sociometric status (respect and admiration from peers) is more important for well-being than socioeconomic status.[9] Furthermore, studies have shown that negative social judgment is associated with a spike in cortisol (a hormone linked to stress) that is three times higher than in nonsocial stressful situations.[10] We feel pressure to build and maintain social status, and fear losing it.

It seems reasonable to think that the most downtrodden might be most interested in obtaining status and money. But this is not the

9 C. Anderson, M. W. Kraus, A. D. Galinsky, and D. Keltner, "The Local-Ladder Effect: Social Status and Subjective Well-Being," *Psychological Science* 23 (2012): 764–771.

10 S. S. Dickerson and M. E. Kemeny, "Acute Stressors and Cortisol Responses: A Theoretical Integration and Synthesis of Laboratory Research," *Psychological Bulletin* 130 (2004): 355.

case. Denizens of prestigious institutions are even more interested than others in prestige and wealth. For many of them, that drive is how they reached their lofty positions in the first place. Fueling this desire, they're surrounded by people just like them—their peers and competitors are also intelligent status-seekers. They persistently look for new ways to move upward and avoid moving downward. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim understood this when he wrote, "The more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs."[11] And research supports this. A psychology study in 2020 revealed that "Upper-class individuals cared more about status and valued it more highly than working-class individuals. . . . Furthermore, compared with lower-status individuals, high-status individuals were more likely to engage in behavior aimed at protecting or enhancing their status."[12] Plainly, high-status people desire status more than anyone else does.

You might think that, for example, rich students at elite universities would be happy because their parents are in the top 1 percent of income earners, and that statistically they will soon join their parents in this elite guild. But remember, they're surrounded by other members of the 1 percent. For many elite college students, their social circle consists of baby millionaires, which often instills a sense of insecurity and an anxiety to preserve and maintain their positions against such rarefied competitors.

11 F. W. Elwell, "Emile Durkheim's Sociology," http://faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Durkheim/index2.htm.

12 C. Anderson, J. A. D. Hildreth, and D. L. Sharps, "The Possession of High Status Strengthens the Status Motive," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46 (2020): 1712–1723.

Thorstein Veblen's famous "leisure class" has evolved into the "luxury belief class." Veblen, an economist and sociologist, made his observations about social class in the late nineteenth century. He compiled his observations in his classic 1899 book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. A key idea is that because we can't be certain of the financial standing of other people, a good way to size up their means is to see whether they can afford to waste money on goods and leisure. This explains why status symbols are so often difficult to obtain and costly to purchase. In Veblen's day, people exhibited their status with delicate and restrictive clothing like tuxedos, top hats, and evening gowns, or by partaking in time-consuming activities like golf or beagling. Such goods and leisurely activities could only be purchased or performed by those who did not live the life of a manual laborer and could spend time learning something with no practical utility. Veblen even goes so far as to say, "The chief use of servants is the evidence they afford of the master's ability to pay." For Veblen, even butlers were status symbols.

Veblen proposed that the wealthy flaunt these symbols not because they are useful, but because they are so pricey or wasteful that only the wealthy can afford them, which is why they're high-status indicators.

During my first year at Yale in 2015, it was common to see students at Ivy League colleges wearing Canada Goose jackets. Is it necessary to spend nine hundred dollars to stay warm in New England? No. But kids weren't spending their parents' money just for the warmth. They were spending the equivalent of the typical American's weekly income ($865) for the logo. Likewise, are students spending $250,000 at prestigious universities for the education? Maybe. But they are also spending it for the logo.

As NYU professor Scott Galloway said in an interview in 2020, "The strongest brand in the world is not Apple or Mercedes-Benz or Coca-Cola. The strongest brands are MIT, Oxford, and Stanford. Academics and administrators at the top universities have decided over the last thirty years that we're no longer public servants; we're luxury goods."[13]

This is not to say that elite colleges don't educate their students, or that Canada Goose jackets don't keep their wearers warm. But top universities are also crucial for induction into the luxury belief class. Take vocabulary. Your typical working-class American could not tell you what *heteronormative* or *cisgender* means. But if you visit an elite college, you'll find plenty of affluent people who will eagerly explain them to you. When someone uses the phrase *cultural appropriation*, what they are really saying is, "I was educated at a top college." Consider the Veblen quote, "Refined tastes, manners, habits of life are a useful evidence of gentility, because good breeding requires time, application and expense, and can therefore not be compassed by those whose time and energy are taken up with work." Only the affluent can afford to learn strange vocabulary, because ordinary people have real problems to worry about.

The chief purpose of luxury beliefs is to indicate the believer's social class and education. When an affluent person expresses support for defunding the police, drug legalization, open borders, looting, or permissive sexual norms, or uses terms like *white privilege*,

13 J. D. Walsh, "The Coming Disruption," *New York*, May 11, 2020, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/05/scott-galloway-future-of-college.html.

they are engaging in a status display. They are trying to tell you, "I am a member of the upper class."

Focusing on "representation" rather than helping the downtrodden is another luxury belief. Many of the protesters on campus urged for more individuals from historically mistreated groups to be represented among students and faculty, among elite internships and occupations, and in influential positions in society at large. I thought of this as "trickle-down meritocracy." The idea seemed to be that the best way to help struggling communities is to pluck representatives out and put them into positions of power. As long as the ruling class has a few members from these communities, then somehow the advantages they accrue will "trickle down" to their communities. Thus far, there doesn't seem to be evidence that this works. Representation certainly benefits a handful of people who are chosen to enter elite spaces, but it doesn't seem to improve the lives of the dispossessed. In fact, it might backfire. Elite institutions strip-mine talented people out of their communities. Upon completing their education, most of these graduates do not return to their old neighborhoods. Instead, they relocate to a handful of cities where they live alongside their highly educated peers, eroding the bonds of solidarity they had with those they left behind. And who could blame them? It is reasonable to use your talents to advance your career and financial prospects. But if the original intent was to help languishing communities, then this particular solution is failing.

White privilege is the luxury belief that took me the longest to understand, because I grew up around a lot of poor white people. Affluent white college graduates seem to be the most enthusiastic

about the idea of white privilege, yet they are the least likely to incur any costs for promoting that belief. Rather, they raise their social standing by talking about their privilege. In other words, upper-class white people gain status by talking about their high status. When policies are implemented to combat white privilege, it won't be Yale graduates who are harmed. Poor white people will bear the brunt.

The upper class promotes abolishing the police or decriminalizing drugs or white privilege because it advances their social standing, not least because they know that the adoption of those policies will cost them less than others. The logic is akin to conspicuous consumption: if you're a student who has a large subsidy from your parents and I do not, you can afford to waste $900 and I can't, so wearing a Canada Goose jacket is a good way of advertising your superior wealth and status. Proposing policies that will cost you as a member of the upper class less than they would cost me serves the same function. Advocating for sexual promiscuity, drug experimentation, or abolishing the police are good ways of advertising your membership of the elite because, thanks to your wealth and social connections, they will cost you less than me.

Reflecting on my experiences with alcohol, if all drugs had been legal and easily accessible when I was fifteen, you wouldn't be reading this book. My birth mom was able to get drugs, and it had a detrimental effect on both of our lives. That's something people don't think about: drugs don't just affect the user, they affect helpless children, too. All my foster siblings' parents were addicts, or had a mental health condition, often triggered by drug use. But the luxury belief class doesn't think about that because such consequences seldom interrupt their lives. And even if they did, they are in a far better position to

withstand such difficulties. A well-heeled student at an elite university can experiment with cocaine and will, in all likelihood, be fine. A kid from a dysfunctional home with absentee parents will often take that first hit of meth to self-destruction. This is perhaps why a 2019 survey found that less than half of Americans without a college degree want to legalize drugs, but more than 60 percent of Americans with a bachelor's degree or higher are in favor of drug legalization.[14] Drugs are frequently considered a recreational pastime for the rich, but for the poor they are often a gateway to further pain.

Similarly, a 2020 survey found that the richest Americans showed the strongest support for defunding the police, while the poorest Americans reported the lowest support.[15] Throughout the remainder of that year and into 2021, murder rates throughout the US soared as a result of defunding policies, officers retiring early or quitting, and police departments struggling to recruit new members after the luxury belief class cultivated an environment of loathing toward law enforcement.[16]

The luxury belief class appears to sympathize more with criminals than their victims. It's true that most criminals come from poor backgrounds. But it's also true that their victims are mostly poor. And the perpetrators tend to be young men, and their targets are

14 E. Elkins, "2019 Welfare, Work, and Wealth National Survey," Cato Institute, September 24, 2019, https://www.cato.org/publications/survey-reports/what-americans-think-about-poverty-wealth-work.

15 "Yahoo News/YouGov Race and Politics Survey, June 11, 2020." PDF file. Accessed July 25, 2023. https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/86ijosd7cy/20200611_yahoo_race_police_covid_crosstabs.pdf.

16 Z. Elinson, "Murders in US Cities Were Near Record Highs in 2021," *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2022.

often poor women or the elderly. Moreover, because there are many times more victims than there are criminals, to not stop criminals is to victimize the poor. Yet the movement to abolish the police is disproportionately championed by affluent people. A key inhibition against crime is the belief that our legal system is legitimate. Which means that those who promote the idea that we live in an unjust society also help to cultivate crime.

The poor reap what the luxury belief class sows.

Consider that compared to Americans who earn more than $75,000 a year, the poorest Americans are seven times more likely to be victims of robbery, seven times more likely to be victims of aggravated assault, and twenty times more likely to be victims of sexual assault.[17] And yet, as I write this, many affluent people are calling to abolish law enforcement.

Maybe the luxury belief class is ignorant of the realities of who is most harmed by crime. Or perhaps they don't care that the poor will become even more victimized than they already are.

Unfortunately, like fashion trends that debut on the runway and make it into JCPenney three years later, the luxury beliefs of the upper class often trickle down and are adopted by people lower on the food chain, which means many of these beliefs end up causing social harm. Take polyamory, which involves open relationships where people have multiple partners at the same time. A student at a top university once explained to me that when he set the radius on his dating apps to five miles, about half of the women, mostly other

17 US Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011," Table 316, https://www.usgs.gov/publications/2011-statistical-abstract-united-states-0.

students, said they were "polyamorous" in their bios. Then, when he extended the radius to fifteen miles to include the rest of the city and its outskirts, about half of the women were single mothers. Polyamory is the latest expression of sexual freedom championed by the affluent. They are in a better position to manage the complications of novel relationship arrangements. And if these relationships don't pan out, or if kids are involved, affluent adults can more easily recuperate thanks to their financial capability and social capital. Meanwhile, the less fortunate suffer as the beliefs of the upper class spread throughout society as a result of their disproportionate influence.

Most personal to me is the luxury belief that family is unimportant or that children are equally likely to thrive in all family structures. In 1960, the percentage of American children living with both biological parents was identical for affluent and working-class families—95 percent. By 2005, 85 percent of affluent families were still intact, but for working-class families the figure had plummeted to 30 percent. The Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam at a 2017 Senate hearing stated, "Rich kids and poor kids now grow up in separate Americas. . . . Growing up with two parents is now unusual in the working class, while two-parent families are normal and becoming more common among the upper middle class."[18] Affluent people, particularly in the 1960s, championed sexual freedom. Loose sexual norms caught on for the rest of society. The upper class, though, still had intact families. Generally speaking, they experimented in college and then settled down later. The families of the lower classes fell apart.

18 R. D. Putnam, Hearing on the State of Social Capital in America, United States Senate, May 17, 2017, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/222a1636-e668-4893-b082-418a100fd93d/robert-putnam-testimony.pdf.

This deterioration is still happening. In 2006, more than half of American adults without a college degree believed it was "very important" that couples with children should be married. Fast-forward to 2020, and this number has plummeted to 31 percent. Among college graduates, only 25 percent think couples should be married before having kids.[19] Their actions, though, contradict their luxury beliefs: the vast majority of American college graduates who have children are married. Despite their *behavior* suggesting otherwise, affluent people are the most likely to *say* marriage is unimportant. Gradually, their message has spread.

I've also heard graduates of top universities say marriage is "just a piece of paper." People shouldn't have to prove their commitment to their spouse with a document, they tell me. I have never heard them ridicule a college degree as "just a piece of paper." Many affluent people belittle marriage, but not college, because they view a degree as critical for their social positions.

Here is an example of how this phenomenon works. Before my first year of college, I had never even been to a musical. No one I knew from Red Bluff had ever been to one. But it seemed like everyone on campus had seen *Hamilton*, the acclaimed musical about the American founding father Alexander Hamilton.

I looked up tickets: $400. This was way beyond my budget. So

19 J. M. Jones, "Is Marriage Becoming Irrelevant?," Gallup, December 28, 2020, http://news.gallup.com/poll/316223/fewer-say-important-parents-married.aspx.

in 2020, I was pleased to see that five years after *Hamilton*'s debut, it was available to view on Disney+. But suddenly, the musical was being denigrated by many of the same people who formerly enjoyed it, because it didn't reflect the failings of American society in the eighteenth century. The creator of *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda, even posted on Twitter that "All the criticisms are valid." This reveals how social class works in America. It is not a coincidence that when *Hamilton* tickets were prohibitively expensive, affluent people loved it, and now that it can be viewed by ordinary Americans, they ridicule it. Once something becomes too popular, the elites update their tastes to distinguish themselves from ordinary people.

In 2015, seeing *Hamilton* was a major status symbol. In 2020, it didn't mean much. And this is why the affluent suddenly turned on the musical. It's a status game, with members of the upper class distancing themselves from something that had become too popular. Once a piece of art becomes mainstream, elites must distance themselves from it and redirect their attention to something new, obscure, or difficult to obtain. The affluent relentlessly search for signals that distinguish them from the masses.

A former classmate recently told me that he didn't enjoy *Hamilton* but never told anyone because everyone at Yale loved it. However, once the musical became unfashionable, he suddenly became open about his dislike of it. I noticed that many Yale students selectively concealed their opinions or facts about their lives. More than one student quietly confessed to me that they pretended to be poorer than they really were, because they didn't want the stigma of being thought rich. Why was it a stigma to be known as rich at a

rich university full of rich students? It's a class thing. For the upper class, indicating your social position by speaking about money is vulgar, sharing your educational credentials less so, and broadcasting your luxury beliefs is the least tacky—or most favorable—of all.

Furthermore, it is harder for wealthy people to claim the mantle of victimhood, which, among the affluent, is often a key ingredient to be seen as a righteous person. In fact, researchers at Harvard Business School and Northwestern University recently found evidence of a "virtuous victim" effect, in which victims are seen as more moral than nonvictims who have behaved in exactly the same way. People are inclined to positively evaluate those who have suffered.[20] Plainly, if people think you are a victim, they will be more likely to excuse your detestable behaviors. But ironically, the most well-off are also the most capable of accentuating their supposed marginalization. They can communicate their hardships in a language that other well-to-do people can understand. Prestigious universities encourage students to nurture their grievances, giving rise to a peculiar situation in which the most advantaged are the most well-equipped to tell other advantaged people how disadvantaged they are.

The upper class's drive to distinguish themselves from the masses explains the ever-evolving standards of luxury beliefs. To become fully acculturated into the elite requires knowing the habits, customs, and manners of the upper class. To stay up to date, you need lots of leisure time or have the kind of job that allows you to browse Twitter. A common rebuke to those who are not fully up to date on the latest intellectual fads is "educate yourself." This is how the affluent block

20 J. J. Jordan and M. Kouchaki, "Virtuous Victims," *Science Advances* 7 (2021): eabg5902.

mobility for people who work multiple jobs, have children to care for, and don't have the time or means to read the latest bestseller that outlines the proper way to think about social issues. And by the time they do, as was the case with *Hamilton*, the cultural fashions will have shifted yet again. Thus, it seems the affluent secure their positions by ensuring that only those who attend the right colleges, listen to the right podcasts, and read the right books and articles can join their inner circle.

Occasionally, I raised these critiques to fellow students or graduates of elite colleges. Sometimes they would reply by asking, "Well, aren't you part of this group now?" implying that my appraisals of the luxury belief class were hollow because I moved within the same institutions. But they wouldn't have listened to me back when I was a lowly enlisted service member or back when I was washing dishes for minimum wage. If you ridicule the upper class as an outsider, they'll either ignore you or tell you that you don't know what you're talking about. But if you ridicule them as an insider, they call you a hypocrite. Plainly, the requirements for the upper class to take you seriously (e.g., credentials, wealth, power) are also the grounds to brand you a hypocrite for making any criticism of the upper class.

But I don't want to give the impression that only the well-to-do care about or react to symbols. Shortly after enlisting, I bought Mom a license plate frame for her 2006 Toyota Camry that read "US Air Force Mom." Cheesy, I know. But she'd been eyeing it at a store on base, and the frame was a way of expressing how proud she was of me. Mom told me that it has gotten her out of more than a few speeding tickets.

"Cops pull me over and ask about it. I tell them my boy is

serving overseas and they let me off with a warning." A ten-dollar piece of plastic probably saved a thousand bucks. Not a bad investment.

Later, Mom told me another story.

"I was wearing my 'Yale Mom' cap at softball practice with the local recreational team. Someone came up to me and asked, 'Is that real?' Pointing at my head, kind of rude about it."

"What did you say?" I asked Mom.

"I just nodded and said yeah. What a strange question!"

To Mom, the hat was just a way of expressing how proud she was of me. Still, we both agreed that it probably wouldn't get her out of any speeding tickets.

I also worked with a former Marine who was interested in attending college. I took a special interest in Daniel because of our similar upbringings. He had been born to a mother who became addicted to crack and, as a consequence, Daniel was placed in foster care as a child. We worked together on his college applications, and he earned admission to Brown University. Seeing him accomplish his educational goals almost made me happier than when I'd done so. In his first semester, Daniel expressed dismay at seeing students on his campus burning American flags on Veterans Day. It seemed like he was having the same misgivings about his new surroundings as I had when I first entered Yale.

Another veteran friend at a different college asked me, "Don't you ever feel like a sucker for serving?"

I paused, unsure what to say. I didn't feel like a sucker. But I would come to understand what he was getting at.

"Something's off about the whole thing. We swear that oath about upholding the Constitution. Then these rich kids who are the same age as us when we enlisted are actively undermining it. Pretty weird."

"Undermining how?" I asked.

"The first two amendments," he continued. "The general opinion at these schools is that the first needs a major overhaul and the second should be completely dismantled. Seems like we basically got duped into believing we are upholding American values while the future ruling class are figuring out ways to undermine them."

I could sense his feeling of betrayal. I grew to understand that, at least within some upper-class circles, patriotism and support for the Constitution marks one as a rube. The irony was not lost on me—students who would burn flags or attempt to silence dissenting viewpoints were being protected by the very principles they despised and the people to whom they felt superior. Even the students from affluent backgrounds who were patriotic and believed in the American Dream seldom publicly expressed it. They withheld their views to fit in and avoid ostracism.

I also found a couple of friends in the ROTC program at Yale. Esteban and Nick didn't grow up like me, but they weren't quite as well-off as many of our classmates. One day we were at Esteban's apartment when we all had the same realization: When we were kids, chain restaurants like Applebee's and Olive Garden were considered "fine dining." That was where people with money went out

to eat. Upon meeting real rich people, we realized none of them went to such restaurants, except as a novelty. I later suggested to Nick, Esteban, and some other students that we go to the Cheesecake Factory. One guy asked, "Are we going there ironically?" I flatly said no and ordered some Buffalo Blasts.

I realized that even dietary choices reflected class differences. Yale dining halls had soda fountains that nobody used, save for the one nozzle that dispensed water. The halls also offered "spa water," which was water flavored with cucumbers or strawberries. I'd always associated that with rich people on TV. I mentally contrasted this to my high school, where I couldn't go more than ten minutes without seeing someone carrying a Powerade or a Pepsi. There was a striking absence of obesity among the students—many of them seemed to be preoccupied with their weight and image. I learned a term I'd never heard before: *fat shaming*. It was remarkable that students who seldom consumed sugary drinks and often closely adhered to nutrition and fitness regimens were also attempting to create a taboo around discussions of obesity. The unspoken oath seemed to be, "I will carefully monitor my health and fitness, but will not broadcast the importance of what I am doing, because that is fat shaming." The people who were most vocal about what they called "body positivity," which seemed to be a tool to inhibit discussions about the health consequences of obesity, were often very physically fit.

The luxury belief class claims that the unhappiness associated with certain behaviors and choices primarily stems from the negative social judgments they elicit, rather than the behaviors and choices themselves. But, in fact, negative social judgments often

serve as guardrails to deter detrimental decisions that lead to unhappiness. In order to avoid misery, we have to admit that certain actions and choices are actually in and of themselves undesirable—single parenthood, obesity, substance abuse, crime, and so on—and not simply in need of normalization.

Indeed, it's cruel to validate decisions that inflict harm, especially on those who had no hand in the decision—like young children.

Before starting my final year of college, I got a position as a summer research assistant at Stanford University. This was an ideal location because it was close to Mom, who lived nearby in San Jose. At Stanford, I helped with research in developmental psychology, running studies with young children. I was interested in doing this kind of research because I'd taken a class with Yale psychology professor Frank Keil, who, during a lecture, said, "If you want to understand the mature form of an organism, it helps to understand its history."

In the evenings at Stanford, I took a GRE prep course, hoping to score well enough to get into a good PhD program. I figured if I was going to study psychology, I should go as far as I could and get a comprehensive education. So I signed up to take the GRE course, which was about as dull as you'd expect, but the instructor said something that stuck with me.

"Many of the reading comprehension passages in the verbal section of the GRE," he explained, "are drawn from periodicals like *The Atlantic* or *Scientific American*. This is because graduate programs believe these kinds of articles are set at the right level for a bright

college graduate to be able to grasp quickly. But they are also *testing for people who read these kinds of magazines.*"

In other words, the instructor claimed the test screens for social class as well as academic ability. *The Atlantic* characterizes its subscribers as "affluent and accomplished." A survey found that 77 percent of their readers have a bachelor's degree and about half have an annual household income of more than $100,000.[21] In contrast, only 32 percent of American adults aged twenty-five or older have graduated from college,[22] and only 25 percent of American households make more than $100,000 a year.[23]

While at Stanford, I discovered another pernicious luxury belief.

I was living in a house on campus with a bunch of students for the summer. I asked a housemate who was working on a start-up how he'd gotten into Stanford and what steps he was taking to build his company.

He paused for a moment and then said, "Ultimately, it comes down to luck."

As soon as he said that, it occurred to me that this mind-set is

21 J. Zhang, "A Systematic Breakdown of *The Atlantic* Magazine," Medium, August 30, 2019, https://medium.com/@josephhhz/a-systematic-breakdown-of-the-atlantic-magazine-aed8ce0725b6.

22 K. McElrath and M. Martin, "Bachelor's Degree Attainment in the United States: 2005 to 2019," US Census Bureau, 2021, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/acs/acsbr-009.html.

23 Heather Long, "Is $100,000 Middle Class in America?," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/10/25/is-100000-middle-class-in-america/.

pervasive at Yale as well—far more common than among the people I grew up around or the women and men I served with in the military. Many of my peers at Yale and Stanford would work ceaselessly. But when I'd ask them about the plans they'd implemented to get into college, or start a company, or land their dream job, they'd often suggest they just got lucky rather than attribute their success to their efforts. Interestingly, it seems like many people who earn status by working hard are able to boost their status among their peers even more by saying they just got lucky. This isn't just limited to my own observations, either. A 2019 study found that people with high income and social status are the most likely to attribute success to mere luck rather than hard work.[24]

Both luck and hard work play a role in the direction of our lives, but stressing the former at the expense of the latter doesn't help those at or near the bottom of society. If disadvantaged people come to believe that luck is the key factor that determines success, then they will be less likely to strive to improve their lives. One study tracked more than six thousand young adults in the US at the beginning of their careers over the course of two decades, and found that those who believed that life's outcomes are due to their own efforts as opposed to external factors became more successful in their careers and went on to attain higher earnings.[25]

Getting back to my conversation with the guy at Stanford, he'd

24 J. Daniels and M. Wang, "What Do You Think? Success: Is It Luck or Is It Hard Work?," *Applied Economics Letters* 26 (2019): 1734–1738.

25 M. Van Praag, J. Van Der Sluis, and A. Van Witteloostuijn, "The Impact of the Locus-of-Control Personality Trait on the Earnings of Employees vis-à-vis Entrepreneurs," Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper (2004): 130.

told me a few days prior that he had a younger sister. So I asked, "If your sister asked you how to get into Stanford or start a company, would you shrug and say 'I just got lucky' or would you explain whatever it was that you actually did—'You have to study, sacrifice, work on the weekends, or whatever'?"

He rolled his eyes before replying, "Yeah, I get it."

Successful people tell the world they got lucky but then tell their loved ones about the importance of hard work and sacrifice. Critics of successful people tell the world those successful people got lucky and then tell their loved ones about the importance of hard work and sacrifice.

By this point, after three years immersed in this kind of thinking, I lost that state of deep curiosity about this environment that I had back when I started college. Now, I felt I had a decent understanding of the social milieu of top universities. But at Stanford, I gleaned some further insights at a top preschool.

As a summer research assistant, I visited the Bing Nursery School at Stanford every morning to help recruit children to be participants in studies for the psychology department. The kids at this preschool tend to come from well-heeled families—much different from the kids I worked with in New Haven. Many things about this Stanford nursery intrigued me, including how many teachers each classroom had (usually at least two), how they encouraged the children's creativity and curiosity, how well-behaved the children were (very), and what they ate at snack time. I didn't see a single Fruit Roll-Up or Flamin' Hot Cheeto. Instead, the teachers served the kids celery with peanut butter, slices of cheese, and pieces of banana. I wondered how my life might have been different if I'd gone to this kind

of preschool. Probably not much different, considering how turbulent my home life was.

One thing that surprised me was how attentive these kids were in our research studies. Typically, developmental psychology researchers exclude some children from their analyses if their responses indicate that they misunderstood the questions. At Stanford, we excluded around 10 percent to 20 percent of the child participants. But at schools in New Haven, we sometimes had to exclude more than half of the kids. Considering what a dismal elementary school student I'd been, I almost certainly would have been excluded from these kinds of studies for not paying attention.

Near the end of my internship, I was out in the playground helping a few kids dig a hole in the sand pit. One of the boys mentioned he'd gone out to eat with his family the night before.

"What did you have for dinner?" I asked.

"Arugula salad," he replied. "But usually I get squid ink."

I didn't know what surprised me more—the choice of food or the fact that he pronounced *arugula* perfectly.

One of the other kids chimed in and said she hated squid ink. I asked her what her favorite dessert was.

"Lemon meringue pie."

And here I thought every little kid hated the taste of lemon, just like I had.

Up ahead, I saw that a new kid had joined the playground. It was her first day, and I'd noticed she'd been quiet throughout the afternoon. She was understandably shy in this new environment. She stared at a model wooden car in the middle of the grass. Two

other little girls were in the front seat pretending to drive. The new girl tepidly climbed into the backseat of the car.

"Hey," she said to the two girls. "How about I be sick, and you two are the ambulance drivers?"

The two girls in the front seat shook their heads.

"Okay, um, how about I be a bad guy? And you're the cops!"

The two girls again shook their heads. The new girl in the backseat looked over at me, maybe hoping I'd suggest some other ideas.

One of the girls in the front seat whispered a little too loudly, "Look, she's distracted." They both ran off. The new kid looked away from me, apparently hoping I hadn't seen what just happened.

Waves of grief washed over me. I knew what it was like to be the new kid. My response to that kind of social rejection would have been to break something or start a fight with someone or swear at the teacher. This kid just sat quietly.

I handed my shovel to one of the boys nearby, picked up a basketball, and walked over to the girl. I spun the ball on my finger, which I'd learned to do years ago with a cheap rubber ball I'd bought at Walmart.

"Want to learn how to do this?" I asked.

She smiled and tried to take the ball from me. I spun it again and placed it on her finger. Afterward, we sat in the nursery as one of the teachers read *Not Quite Narwhal* aloud to the kids. The story is about a lonely unicorn who is raised by whales and doesn't quite fit in. I glanced at the new girl, who sat completely still, captivated by this story.

I realized: Reading about others who had survived the

vicissitudes of their youth helped carry me through my turbulent childhood.

I'd been hung up on how to communicate how my life had informed my views about childhood, family, and success. Fortunately, I'd been accepted into the War Horse Writing Seminar at Columbia University. The program was designed to help veterans write about their experiences. At first, it was intimidating, because unlike college classes or the Warrior-Scholar Project, this seminar was about *personal*, as opposed to academic, writing. At Columbia, I wrote a rough draft of a personal essay reflecting on my upbringing but didn't let anyone read it.

On the final day of the seminar, Jim Dao, then the op-ed editor at the *New York Times*, visited our class and invited us to pitch him if we ever had any ideas. I approached him later, telling him about how my college essay had run in the *Times* back in 2015. Jim handed me his card and encouraged me to send him anything else I had. I glanced down at the essay I'd been working on, about to tell him about it, and then quietly returned to my seat. I wasn't ready to share it.

Three months later, in May 2017, I sent it to Jim, unsure how realistic it was to expect a reply. To my surprise, he got back to me within an hour, saying that he liked it. Another editor emailed me, saying they would run it soon.

Months later, I followed up. Total radio silence. I wasn't sure how assertive to be in this situation, but I figured I might as well

keep at it. I sent follow-up emails every two weeks for the next few months. I didn't receive a response to any of them.

It didn't bother me, though, because in yet another surreal moment, I received notification that my application for a Gates Cambridge scholarship to study for a doctorate at the University of Cambridge was successful. With a 1.3 percent acceptance rate, obtaining the scholarship was even more unlikely than getting into Yale. Applicants had to demonstrate academic excellence, leadership ability, and a commitment to improving the lives of others. Between my college transcript, military experience, and my unusual upbringing, I figured I'd be competitive, but I was far from confident.

Now, I couldn't believe I was going back across the Atlantic yet again.

My final year of college was about to conclude.

After the Yale graduation ceremony, I met with Mom and Hannah for dinner. We didn't realize that the restaurants around campus had set menus for graduation day. At the restaurant we visited, the plates were usually around forty dollars per dish on a regular night. This was a bit pricey, but we figured we could splurge because it was graduation day. But we discovered there was a set menu charging $120 per person, presumably because the restaurateurs knew how little the amount mattered to rich Yale parents. Mom's posture stiffened as she looked at the menu. We all looked up at the same time and laughed.

"Hey, let's go around the corner," I suggested.

There was a Chinese restaurant about a block from my apartment downtown. When we arrived, I checked to make sure there was no "set menu." Plates were priced at a much more manageable twelve to fifteen dollars.

"So, who was that guy?" my sister asked, referring back to Matthew's drunken exclamation before the ceremony that my family had "won the adoption lottery."

"Hang on, sorry," I said. My phone had been ringing all day with an unknown number, and I couldn't answer it amid the graduation proceedings.

I stepped outside and picked up. "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Rob?"

"It is."

"Hey, Aaron Retica here from the *New York Times*. We've published your piece online and just want to ask a couple questions before the print version runs tomorrow."

"Oh, great." We had gone over edits a couple of weeks prior, but they were coy when I asked when they expected it would be published. I was glad they'd run it, but also felt trepidation—because of the fear of judgment, mostly. In my college application essay, I'd been forthcoming about my early life. But in this new essay, I tried to communicate the clarity I'd gained from those experiences. I wrote about the importance of family and responsibility, drawing from my turbulent childhood experiences. Four years ago, I could barely talk about any of this in rehab with Alan, and now I was sharing it with the world. I wondered if I'd made a mistake. *Maybe it'll help someone else out there who reads it.*

I answered Aaron's questions. He mentioned that he'd also

attended Yale, and he asked if it was graduation day. I told him it was, and that I was at dinner with my family.

"Thanks, Rob, and sorry for interrupting. But at least you can say you got a call from the *Times* at your graduation dinner—it'll make a good story."

Through the windowpane of the restaurant, I saw my family inside. Ever since I left home, I'd been focused on trying to escape my past. I'd strived to be independent so that I wouldn't have to rely on anyone. But now, what mattered most to me was to become someone who could be relied upon. I glanced behind me, in the direction of the campus, and it struck me: What is the point of pursuing education and striving for success? The answer, I realized, was to take care of the family who couldn't take care of me. And, for my future family, to be a better dad than any of my "dads" had been to me. The bar, I thought, was mercifully low.

I thought about how the reason I was even getting this phone call—the reason my op-ed was noteworthy enough to catch an editor's attention—was because of how few of these family dinners I'd had growing up. Looking inside the restaurant, I realized that I would have traded this op-ed, Yale, Cambridge, and all the other amazing things that happened over the last few years to have never had to experience so much grief and disrepair growing up, and to have had more of these family dinners as a kid. I just wanted to get back to this one. So, I thanked Aaron and returned to the seat next to my sister.