

"[Tirado] uses her piercing insight, coupled with a confessional but unrepentant voice, to open a nuanced and deeply unsettling window into poverty in the U.S."

—*Ms. Magazine*

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—Genk Uygur, host of *The Young Turks* (TYTNetwork.com)

"An insightful, heart-wrenching, and at times laugh-out-loud look into how a third of our fellow Americans are living as poor people in an economy that only serves the top 1 percent . . . Tirado's words read like a conversation over coffee, but she delivers a devastating blow to our current economic assumptions equivalent to a modern-day *Oliver Twist* or *The Jungle*."

—Ryan Clayton, Executive Director, Wolf-PAC.com

# HAND to MOUTH

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LIVING IN BOOTSTRAP AMERICA

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*Linda Tirado*

**B**

BERKLEY BOOKS

New York

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry should be clearly documented, including the date, amount, and purpose of the transaction. This ensures transparency and allows for easy reconciliation of accounts.

In the second section, the author outlines the various methods used to collect and analyze data. This includes direct observation, interviews with key personnel, and the use of specialized software tools. The goal is to gather comprehensive information that can be used to identify trends and areas for improvement.

The third section provides a detailed overview of the findings from the study. It highlights several key areas where performance is strong, as well as specific challenges that need to be addressed. The author suggests several strategies to overcome these challenges, such as implementing new technologies and providing additional training for staff.

Finally, the document concludes with a summary of the overall results and a set of recommendations for future action. It stresses the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the implemented changes are effective and sustainable.

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# Foreword

By *Barbara Ehrenreich*

I've been waiting for this book for a long time. Well, not this book, because I never imagined that the book I was waiting for would be so devastatingly smart and funny, so consistently entertaining and unflinchingly on target. In fact, I would like to have written it myself—if, that is, I had lived Linda Tirado's life and extracted all the hard lessons she has learned. I am the author of *Nickel and Dimed*, which tells the story of my own brief attempt, as a semi-undercover journalist, to survive on low-wage retail and service jobs. Tirado is the real thing.

After my book came out in 2001, I spent over ten years on the road talking about it at union conferences, church gatherings, and mostly on college campuses. I did this partly

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for the money because I had lost my best-paying journalistic job in 1997, and then a few years later the media decided that writers no longer needed to be paid at all, as if writing involves no caloric expenditure whatsoever.

But I also did it because I was on a mission. People often asked how my work for *Nickel and Dime* changed me, and I think they meant how did it make me, as a middle-class person, more aware of the poor. Well, I didn't need that much more awareness since I was born into the lower rung of the working class and managed to re-land in it by becoming a single mother and then marrying a warehouse worker when I was in my thirties. So my stint as a low-wage worker/journalist had only one major effect on me: It moved me from concern about the exploitation of low-wage workers—to something more like rage.

I had expected to experience material deprivation in my life at \$7 an hour (the equivalent of about \$9 today), and I certainly did. The fact that I had some built-in privileges like a working car (I got a Rent-A-Wreck in each of the cities where I worked so I wouldn't end up writing a book about waiting for buses) only made the deprivation part more shocking. Here I was—in good health, with no small children in my care—working full-time, sometimes more than one job at time, sometimes to the point where my legs felt like rubber, and I was living in a dump and dining at convenience stores or Wendy's.

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What I had not expected was the daily humiliation, the insults and what seemed like mean-spirited tricks. To be poor is to be treated like a criminal, under constant suspicion of drug use and theft. It means having no privacy, since the boss has the legal right to search your belongings for stolen items. It involves being jerked around unaccountably, like the time Wal-Mart suddenly changed my schedule, obliterating the second job I had lined up. It means being ordered to “work through” injuries and illness, like the debilitating rash I once acquired from industrial-strength cleaning fluids.

And what was most amazing to me: Being a low-wage worker means being robbed by the very employer who is monitoring *you* so insistently for theft. You can be forced to work overtime without pay or made to start working forty-five minutes before the time clock starts ticking. If you do the math, you may find that a few more hours have been shaved off your paycheck each week by the corporation’s computers.

But when I made my way from campus to campus, telling my stories about work and urging students to take an interest in all the low-wage workers who were making their education possible every day—the food service workers, janitors, clerical workers, and adjunct faculty—I was invariably asked the question that boils down to: What’s wrong with these people? Meaning the workers, not their bosses.

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Typically, the questioner would be a frat boy who had taken Econ 101, a course which exists, as far as I can see, for the sole purpose of convincing young people that the existing class structure is just, fair, and unchangeable anyway. If there's nothing wrong with our economic arrangements, then the only remaining question is: Why do "these people" have children, lack savings, fail to go to college, eat junk food, smoke cigarettes, or whatever else is imagined to be holding them back?

So when I came across Linda Tirado's blog about six months ago, I felt an enormous wave of vindication. Even—or, perhaps, especially—her admission that she smokes cigarettes hit me like a gust of fresh air. She tells what it's like to be a low-wage worker for the long term, with an erratically employed husband and two small children to raise and support. She makes all the points I have been trying to make in my years of campaigning for higher wages and workers' rights: That poverty is not a "culture" or a character defect; it is a shortage of money. And that that shortage arises from grievously inadequate pay, aggravated by constant humiliation and stress, as well as outright predation by employers, credit companies, and even law enforcement agencies.

But let me get out of the way now. She can tell this so much better than I can.



# Introduction

In the fall of 2013, I was in my first semester of school in a decade. I had two jobs; my husband, Tom, was working full-time; and we were raising our two small girls. It was the first time in years that we felt like maybe things were looking like they'd be okay for a while.

After a particularly grueling shift at work, I was unwinding online when I saw a question from someone on a forum I frequented: *Why do poor people do things that seem so self-destructive?* I thought I could at least explain what I'd seen and how I'd reacted to the pressures of being poor. I wrote my answer to the question, hit post, and didn't think more about it for at least a few days. This is what it said:

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### WHY I MAKE TERRIBLE DECISIONS, OR, POVERTY THOUGHTS

There's no way to structure this coherently. They are random observations that might help explain the mental processes. But often, I think that we look at the academic problems of poverty and have no idea of the why. We know the what and the how, and we can see systemic problems, but it's rare to have a poor person actually explain it on their own behalf. So this is me doing that, sort of.

Rest is a luxury for the rich. I get up at 6 a.m., go to school (I have a full course load, but I only have to go to two in-person classes), then work, then I get the kids, then I pick up my husband, then I have half an hour to change and go to Job 2. I get home from that at around 12:30 a.m., then I have the rest of my classes and work to tend to. I'm in bed by 3. This isn't every day, I have two days off a week from each of my obligations. I use that time to clean the house and soothe Mr. Martini and see the kids for longer than an hour and catch up on schoolwork. Those nights I'm in bed by midnight, but if I go to bed too early I won't be able to stay up the other nights because I'll fuck my pattern up, and I drive an hour home from Job 2 so I can't afford to be sleepy. I never get a day off from work unless I am fairly sick. It

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doesn't leave you much room to think about what you are doing, only to attend to the next thing and the next. Planning isn't in the mix.

When I was pregnant the first time, I was living in a weekly motel for some time. I had a minifridge with no freezer and a microwave. I was on WIC. I ate peanut butter from the jar and frozen burritos because they were 12/\$2. Had I had a stove, I couldn't have made beef burritos that cheaply. And I needed the meat, I was pregnant. I might not have had any prenatal care, but I am intelligent enough to eat protein and iron whilst knocked up.

I know how to cook. I had to take Home Ec to graduate high school. Most people on my level didn't. Broccoli is intimidating. You have to have a working stove, and pots, and spices, and you'll have to do the dishes no matter how tired you are or they'll attract bugs. It is a huge new skill for a lot of people. That's not great, but it's true. And if you fuck it up, you could make your family sick. We have learned not to try too hard to be middle class. It never works out well and always makes you feel worse for having tried and failed yet again. Better not to try. It makes more sense to get food that you know will be palatable and cheap and that keeps well. Junk food is a pleasure that we are allowed to have; why would we give that up? We have very few of them.

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The closest Planned Parenthood to me is three hours. That's a lot of money in gas. Lots of women can't afford that, and even if you live near one you probably don't want to be seen coming in and out in a lot of areas. We're aware that we are not "having kids," we're "breeding." We have kids for much the same reasons that I imagine rich people do. Urge to propagate and all. Nobody likes poor people procreating, but they judge abortion even harder.

Convenience food is just that. And we are not allowed many conveniences. Especially since the Patriot Act passed, it's hard to get a bank account. But without one, you spend a lot of time figuring out where to cash a check and get money orders to pay bills. Most motels now have a no-credit-card-no-room policy. I wandered around SF for five hours in the rain once with nearly a thousand dollars on me and could not rent a room even if I gave them a \$500 cash deposit and surrendered my cell phone to the desk to hold as surety.

Nobody gives enough thought to depression. You have to understand that we know that we will never not feel tired. We will never feel hopeful. We will never get a vacation. Ever. We know that the very act of being poor guarantees that we will never not be poor. It doesn't give us much reason to improve ourselves. We don't apply for jobs because we know we can't afford to look nice

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enough to hold them. I would make a super legal secretary, but I've been turned down more than once because I "don't fit the image of the firm," which is a nice way of saying "gtfo, pov." I am good enough to cook the food, hidden away in the kitchen, but my boss won't make me a server because I don't "fit the corporate image." I am not beautiful. I have missing teeth and skin that looks like it will when you live on B12 and coffee and nicotine and no sleep. Beauty is a thing you get when you can afford it, and that's how you get the job that you need in order to be beautiful. There isn't much point trying.

Cooking attracts roaches. Nobody realizes that. I've spent a lot of hours impaling roach bodies and leaving them out on toothpick spikes to discourage others from entering. It doesn't work, but is amusing.

"Free" only exists for rich people. It's great that there's a bowl of condoms at my school, but most poor people will never set foot on a college campus. We don't belong there. There's a clinic? Great! There's still a copay. We're not going. Besides, all they'll tell you at the clinic is that you need to see a specialist, which, seriously? Might as well be located on Mars for how accessible it is. "Low-cost" and "sliding scale" sound like "money you have to spend" to me, and they can't actually help you anyway.

I smoke. It's expensive. It's also the best option. You

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see, I am always, always exhausted. It's a stimulant. When I am too tired to walk one more step, I can smoke and go for another hour. When I am enraged and beaten down and incapable of accomplishing one more thing, I can smoke and I feel a little better, just for a minute. It is the only relaxation I am allowed. It is not a good decision, but it is the only one that I have access to. It is the only thing I have found that keeps me from collapsing or exploding.

I make a lot of poor financial decisions. None of them matter, in the long term. I will never not be poor, so what does it matter if I don't pay a thing and a half this week instead of just one thing? It's not like the sacrifice will result in improved circumstances; the thing holding me back isn't that I blow five bucks at Wendy's. It's that now that I have proven that I am a Poor Person that is all that I am or ever will be. It is not worth it to me to live a bleak life devoid of small pleasures so that one day I can make a single large purchase. I will never have large pleasures to hold on to. There's a certain pull to live what bits of life you can while there's money in your pocket, because no matter how responsible you are you will be broke in three days anyway. When you never have enough money it ceases to have meaning. I imagine having a lot of it is the same thing.

Poverty is bleak and cuts off your long-term brain.

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It's why you see people with four different babydaddies instead of one. You grab a bit of connection wherever you can to survive. You have no idea how strong the pull to feel worthwhile is. It's more basic than food. You go to these people who make you feel lovely for an hour that one time, and that's all you get. You're probably not compatible with them for anything long term, but right this minute they can make you feel powerful and valuable. It does not matter what will happen in a month. Whatever happens in a month is probably going to be just about as indifferent as whatever happened today or last week. None of it matters. We don't plan long term because if we do we'll just get our hearts broken. It's best not to hope. You just take what you can get as you spot it.

I am not asking for sympathy. I am just trying to explain, on a human level, how it is that people make what look from the outside like awful decisions. This is what our lives are like, and here are our defense mechanisms, and here is why we think differently. It's certainly self-defeating, but it's safer. That's all. I hope it helps make sense of it.

While I was thinking that maybe a couple of people would read my essay, lightning struck. A lot of people started

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to share it. Someone suggested that I submit it for posting on the main page of the website we hung out on. That wasn't uncommon, so I did. The next thing I knew, the world had turned upside down. The Huffington Post ran my essay on its front page, *Forbes* ran it, *The Nation* ran it.

After the original piece went viral, I got a lot of emails from people who told me that they did not agree; they did not cope in the same ways. That's fair, and true. Keep it in mind. What was neither fair nor true was the criticism I received inferring that I was the wrong sort of poor. A lot of this criticism seemed to center on the fact that I was not born into poverty, as though that were the only way someone might find herself unable to make rent. And yet we have a term for it: downward mobility. We have homeless PhDs and more than one recently middle-class person on food stamps. Poverty is a reality to more people than we're willing to admit.

Overall, though, the response was overwhelmingly one of solidarity. I got thousands of emails from people saying that they understood exactly what I was trying to describe, that they felt the same way. They told me their stories—the things that bothered them and how they were dealing with life. It's not just me who feels this way, not by a long shot. Poor people talk about these things, but no one's listening to us. We don't usually get a chance to explain our own logic. The original piece that you just read, and this



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book, are simply that: explanations. I am doing what I can to walk you through what it is to be poor. To be sure, this is only one version. There are millions of us; our experiences and reactions to them are as varied as our personalities and backgrounds.

I haven't had it worse than anyone else, and actually, that's kind of the point. This is just what life is for roughly a third of the country. We all handle it in our own ways, but we all work in the same jobs, live in the same places, feel the same sense of never quite catching up. We're not any happier about the exploding welfare rolls than anyone else is, believe me. It's not like everyone grows up and dreams of working two essentially meaningless part-time jobs while collecting food stamps. It's just that there aren't many other options for a lot of people.

In fact, the Urban Institute found that half of Americans will experience poverty at some point before they're sixty-five. Most will come out of it after a relatively short time, 75 percent in four years. But that still leaves 25 percent who don't get out quickly, and the study also found that the longer you stay in poverty, the less likely it becomes that you will ever get out.

Most people who live near the bottom go through cycles of being in poverty and being just above it—sometimes they're just okay and sometimes they're underwater. It depends on the year, the job, how healthy you are. What I can

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say for sure is that downward mobility is like quicksand. Once it grabs you, it keeps constraining your options until it's got you completely.

I slid to the bottom through a mix of my own decisions and some seriously bad luck. I think that's true of most people. While it can seem like upward mobility is blocked by a lead ceiling, the layer between lower-middle class and poor is horrifyingly porous from above. A lot of us live in that spongy divide.

I got here in a pretty average way: I left home at sixteen for college, promptly behaved as well as you'd expect a teenager to, and was estranged from my family for over a decade. I quit college when it became clear that I was taking out loans to no good effect; I wasn't ready for it yet. I chased a career simply because it was the first opportunity available rather than because it was sensible.

And I also had medical bills. I had bouts of unemployment, I had a drunken driver total my car. I had everything I owned destroyed in a flood.

So it's not just one or the other: nature or nurture, poor or not poor. Poverty is a potential outcome for all of us.

This is a huge societal problem, and we're just starting to come to grips with all the ways that a technological revolution and globalization have vastly increased inequality. You cannot blame your average citizen for those things. Nor can

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you blame individual companies—it is how we, collectively, have decided to do things.

We got here partially because of bad policy decisions and partially because of factors nobody could have foreseen. Telling an individual company to do better is a lot like telling an individual poor person to save more—true and helpful, but not so easy in practice. Most companies, like most people, aren't the top 1 percent. They are following the market, not driving it. Besides which, any asshole with money can buy and run a company. They're not all smart enough to figure out long-term investments in human capital.

I am not, for all my frustration, opposed to capitalism. Most Americans, poor ones included, aren't. We like the idea that anyone can succeed. What I am opposed to is the sort of capitalism that sucks the life out of a whole bunch of the citizenry and then demands that they do better with whatever they have left. If we could just agree that poor people are doing the necessary grunt work and that there is dignity in that too, we'd be able to make it less onerous.

Put another way: I'm not saying that *someone* doesn't have to scrub the toilets around here. All I'm saying is that maybe instead of being grossed out by the very idea of toilets, you could thank the people doing the cleaning, because if not for them, you'd have to do it your damn self.

In this book I have been careful to obscure identifying

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details about people. Most of the people I've worked for have long since turned over themselves and work elsewhere now. Just in case, however, I have changed places, personal details, and names as needed to protect people's privacy. Nobody, myself included, thought that I'd be writing a book.

A note about the definitions of certain words used in this book: These are my definitions, but I'll tell you what they are up front. *Poverty* is when a quarter is a fucking miracle. *Poor* is when a dollar is a miracle. *Broke* is when five bucks is a miracle. *Working class* is being broke, but doing so in a place that might not be run-down. *Middle class* is being able to own some toys and to live in a nice place—and by “nice,” I don't mean fancy; I mean that you can afford to buy your own furniture and not lease it and that while you still worry about bills, you aren't constantly worried about homelessness. And *rich* is anything above that.

This book is not exhaustive, but it is a collection of some of the emotions and experiences I've had while trying to get back to the starting line. Some of these are illogical. Some are counterintuitive. Some are contradictory. That's because I am a human being, and we are all of those things.

There are also many things that I am not. Instead of attempting to point out how people who are different from me are in many ways far more disadvantaged than I have ever been in every instance I can think of (because that should

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be clear unless you have the peripheral vision of a race-horse), I will just say this: Here is how I have felt, *as me*: as a relatively young person who is perceived as white, who is naturally sociable, who is intelligent and well-spoken, who was taught well and as a result loves learning things, who is able to lift objects up to fifty pounds repeatedly. And many times, with all of that going for me, I still saw no hope. I cannot begin to imagine how much harder it is for someone who faces more discrimination than I have or who grew up without these basic tools that I am lucky enough to have. Keep that in mind too.

I would lastly like this to be clear: I haven't spent a lot of time talking about the good things in my life—my loves and interests and friends. Those exist, because—again—I'm human. Those things are common to all humans, and for now you're interested in the things that are unique to the poor, and how we cope with them. I've focused on the things I've been most often criticized for in my life and explained the motivations as I see them. I'm here to tell you why *this* person does what she does.

So take a tour with me through some of the aspects of life that poverty impacts and on which poor people are judged: our work ethics (or lack thereof), our sex lives (definitely way too much of that), our coping mechanisms (naughty poor people), our health practices (I know, you still can't believe that I smoke). And so on. Stick with me. It

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won't always be easy, but maybe you'll learn something about the lives of your fellow Americans in the process.

And truthfully? What I'm really hoping is that you'll learn something about yourself and that maybe you'll start thinking a bit differently.

So now, the book. Thank you for being open-minded. If you've made it this far (I planted some test profanity in here just to make sure we're on the same page), you might understand what I'm on about.

HAND  
*to*  
MOUTH

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It Takes Money to  
Make Money

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When I tried to come up with my worst, most exemplary terrible job to start off this chapter, I found myself a little bit stuck. Let's just say I have an embarrassment of riches to choose from. But here's one:

I was in my mid-twenties, married, childless. My husband and I lived in a small town in the mountains at the time. I was working as a bartender. If you have ever wondered where frat boys go to die, it's to grown-up fraternal organizations. They have their own members-only bars and pretty much feel like they can do whatever they want inside their members-only walls. And that included, at this place, violating the physical and mental boundaries of those of us serving them their drinks.

LINDA TIRADO

During NASCAR races, we would have dozens of people sitting around drinking Bud Light and arguing the relative merits of Junior. (For the uninitiated, that's Dale Earnhardt Jr. There is a raging debate about the relative merits of Junior versus his daddy, although both are beloved. If you are in the country and you mention Junior by his given name, you will have immediately outed yourself as city folk.) I had two bosses: One was nearing eighty and mostly just wanted to drink copious amounts of rotgut while pretending to manage the books. The other was in his prime—or at least he'd never lived a day in his life in which he didn't think he looked amazing. (Really, he was balding and portly and had a molester mustache. Let's call him M.M. for short.)

M.M. liked to remark on how young I was and then "accidentally" brush against the parts of me that didn't usually see daylight. He wasn't there every day, but when he was, I could look forward to being asked every twenty minutes or so whether I'd be willing to service him sexually. The fact that his wife was often within earshot mattered not at all, because *of course* he was only joshing, proving how virile he still was. Except that the women who did sleep with him got the better shifts. Funny, right?

I wasn't desperate enough to do that for an extra \$20 or \$30 a day. (There is definitely an amount of money you could pay me to have sex with a skeezy old dude, but I'm fairly certain I've priced myself well out of M.M.'s financial

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reach.) Instead, I'd make my minimum wage and maybe another \$10 or \$20 in tips, leaving me with a grand total of enough income to qualify me for state aid.

So I picked up a second job waiting tables. The thing about working for tips is that you're supposed to always make at least the minimum wage. The federal minimum for waiting tables is \$2.13 an hour (some states do have higher minimums for tipped employees, but only about half of them). If you don't make enough in tips to bump you up to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, the restaurant is supposed to kick in the difference. Corporate restaurants are too protective of their bottom lines to allow a single useless employee, so they typically send waitstaff home as soon as they can. The smaller mom-and-pop places, where there might be only a single waitperson on staff for hours at a time when it's slow, might have their employees do deep cleaning and other things when there are no customers. So there you are, working constantly but getting paid only \$2.13 an hour. No matter how good a waitress you are, you probably won't make two or three hours' worth of minimum wage out of tips from your only table in hours. These aren't the kind of restaurants where generous patrons just take it into their heads to overtip. And if you remind your boss that he is supposed to top you off to \$7.25, then you run the risk of finding yourself with reduced hours or fired altogether. So you pretty much keep your mouth shut about that.

## LINDA TIRADO

My second job: I made \$4 an hour or so at that one, because new people get the slow shifts. Hours would go by in which not a single customer walked in. Let me run you through the math on this one: On an average day, I'd work for six or seven hours. I might make \$50. Some days were better, some worse. I couldn't take the busy dinner shifts at the restaurant even after I was trained, because I was at my first job until the middle of dinner rush and the restaurant needed its dinner staff in the door by midafternoon to prep. Meanwhile, I missed special events like picnics and the like at the bar that I might have made money on because I was at the restaurant.

And this is how it goes. Every time I've had more than one job, I've missed out on as much cash as I've made because of scheduling issues. Getting a second job wouldn't be worth it at all except for the fact that those special events and extra hours are never guaranteed in advance. If it's a week with no extra shifts, or with bad weather that keeps customers home, you're stuck. So you hedge that bet by finding another shitty job.

The most I've seen anyone manage at once was four jobs: bartending, dancing, waitressing, and teaching yoga. I've held down up to three: tending bar, waiting tables, and working as a voter registration canvasser. It nearly killed me, and I still didn't break twenty grand that year.

I think that most liberal Americans don't have too hard a

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time believing that it's difficult to make ends meet when you're making minimum wage. But I also think that people in both parties get hung up on the minimum wage as some kind of miracle line of demarcation—as if making more than the minimum puts you on easy street. Meanwhile, millions of people are making above minimum wage—so they don't get counted as making the minimum. And do you know what they're making? Instead of \$7.25 an hour, they're getting \$7.35 an hour. Maybe even \$7.50! In many places in America—think fast-food restaurants, dollar stores, gas stations—most of the employees make under \$8 or \$9. And these employees are not all kids. So when you hear or participate in these discussions about minimum wage statistics, assume that the vast majority of service workers are making within a stone's throw of minimum wage. Our ladder's rungs are set close together, and there are so many of them that it takes us forever to climb it. My husband worked for the same restaurant for nearly two years before he broke \$7.75. Was he making minimum? No. But the difference between minimum wage and \$7.75 is just around \$1,040 a year if you're working full-time, which is pretty rare.

So there you are, working all the time, bringing home so little, and very often getting behind. But your landlord doesn't care that you're working as hard as you can, that there aren't more hours for you to work. The only thing that matters to your landlord is whether or not you have the

money for the rent. I've had a landlord tell me that I could be turning tricks if I really cared about paying my bills, that clearly the only reason I was broke is that I wasn't trying hard enough, that he had no patience for people who couldn't simply get along in life. He actually dispensed all of this as though it were helpful advice rather than a series of insults. And that was *after* the begging, after I'd already debased myself, already explained that my hours got cut for the slow season and they hadn't warned me in time for me to find another job.

This is my bottom-line point about work and poverty: It's far more demoralizing to work and be poor than to be unemployed and poor. I have never minded going without when I wasn't working. It sucks not to be able to find a job, but you expect to be tired and pissed off and to never be able to leave your house when you're flat broke. Working your balls off, begging for more hours, hustling every penny you can, and still not being able to cover your electric bill with any regularity is soul-killing.

The popular conception of minimum wage workers is that they're mostly teenagers working part-time. That would be because the Bureau of Labor Statistics, on its website, is pretty clear that about half of workers making the minimum or below are under the age of twenty-five. But that same BLS website will tell you that about half of workers making



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the minimum or below are *not* under the age of twenty-five. That's 800,000 adults over the age of twenty-five working at minimum wage or below. Or, if you prefer, about 25,000 more people than live in all of San Francisco.

As I've pointed out already, a lot of adults are getting just pennies over the minimum wage—and I'd argue that your average adult does his job, however lowly, a damn sight better than most teenagers. And when you think about how insignificant a raise of even fifty cents above the minimum turns out to be, it's hard not to feel devalued—as if the sum of your accomplishments as an adult amounts to some nickels and dimes.

But let's put that frustration aside and talk about what it actually means to make minimum wage.

Working for minimum wage (or, as we've already established, close to it) means that making a long-term budget is an exercise in wishful thinking. You just have however much money you have until you run out, and you pay whatever bill is most overdue first. When I was working in Ohio at a fast-food joint, I'd generally get about twenty-five hours in a week. That was paid at \$7.50, making my weekly check \$187.50. My husband, working forty hours at the same place, brought home \$300. We made about \$25,000 or so between us, working every week of the year. That's a little over \$9,000 above the poverty line for a family of two, or an extra \$200

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or so a week. We made ends meet, but barely. Not well enough to ever really feel comfortable or rest or take a day off without feeling guilty. And we were at the top of the bottom third of households that year, meaning that approximately one-third of the America population is living on the same sort of budget.

Or, for some, a much smaller one. The yearly income of a forty-hour-a-week minimum-wage worker is \$15,080. So if you're paying half of that for housing, you're left with \$7,540 to live on.

Yearly.

That's \$628 per month, or \$314 per paycheck, for everything else—food, clothes, car payments, gas. If you're lucky, you get all that money to live on. But who's lucky all of the time, or even most of the time? Maybe you get sick and lose your job. Even if you land a new job, that measly \$314 is all you've got to last you until your paychecks at the new place start up. Or what if, God forbid, the car breaks down or you break a bone?

But all right, let's increase that salary. Let's be kind and bump it up well above the median fast-food worker's pay. If you're doing okay, making, say, \$10 an hour, that's \$20,800. That leaves you \$10,400 to live on annually, \$867 monthly, \$433 per paycheck. Before taxes. (Which, by the way, we pay plenty of.) Not that \$100 doesn't make a giant difference, but it's not like you're rolling around in money like

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Scrooge McDuck simply because you're earning better than the absolute least that can be legally paid.

Of course, those scenarios are if you are absolutely jacked, with half of your income going to rent. If we go with the old one-third recommendation, then your disposable income by paycheck rises a bit, to \$418 for those making minimum and \$577 if you're at double digits.

So, let's go with the more generous number. Say you make \$10 an hour and you pay a third of that in rent. That's going to give you \$1,066 a month to spend. You pay your utilities and for gas to get to work. Food and household stuff. Maybe you now have \$500 left. And that's assuming, of course, that you have no medical bills or prescriptions or debts. And that's before taxes.

The truth is that what you've got left from all that work you've been doing is about \$10 per day to spend on anything other than the barest necessities—and that's based on the premise that you live in a shitty apartment, eat cheaply, and work full-time with no missed days. Then, if you do all of those things and you are unburdened by debt and medical issues, you can do any number of things with your free time! You can rent a movie and buy microwave popcorn. You can drive to the nicer section of town and have fancy coffee. With \$10 a day to spend at whim, the world is your oyster. Hell, you could even buy a can of oysters.

I'm hoping that I'm not being too subtle here, because

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this is what it comes down to: The math doesn't fucking work. You can't thrive on this sort of money. Period. You can survive. That's it.

There is something even worse than minimum wage. It's called temp work. I bet that the majority of Americans—unless they've experienced it for themselves—would be shocked to find out that companies regularly hire temps to work full-time hours, but because they hire these workers through temporary work agencies, they have to pay no benefits and offer no job security. To save a buck, companies will regularly hire such workers for years—*years*. And they do it because it's cheaper than hiring labor directly, and they are legally entitled to do so. The laws in this country are so weak that we're actually way behind South Korea (!) in temp worker protections.

So when financially comfortable people with health insurance and paid sick leave and all kinds of other benefits that pad their wallets and make their lives easier and healthier think that the poor are poor because somehow we lack the get-up-and-go to change our circumstances . . . well, I'm not sure my reaction is printable.

I regularly thank the gods that I don't have much experience working in the temp industry. I've got friends that do,

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though, and it's pretty awful. You get to work for a company full-time, as anything from a janitor to an attorney, but you don't get any benefits and they sure as hell aren't telling you to count on keeping this paycheck. They don't guarantee anything. You might have worked there for years, but as long as they keep hiring you through the agency, they can save on pesky things like raises and promotions. One plant I lived near used to hire a revolving number of temp workers whom they laid off after ninety days—the point at which a temp worker is supposed to get permanent job status. Then after three weeks of unemployment, the plant hired them again.

That factory isn't in town anymore. It had gotten a break from the local government, making its first years there tax-free. And wouldn't you know it, after the tax break expired, the company decided that the plant wasn't profitable enough and closed it. A temporary factory that hired temporary workers.

Who says capitalism isn't cruel?



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You Get What You  
Pay For

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As far as I'm concerned, I earn my wages with my scars. Anything above and beyond that is me doing my employers a favor. And I'm not inclined to do favors for people who treat me poorly. See, we work in insane conditions. Dangerous, even. Most kitchens in the middle of the summer are intolerable, with temperatures well into the triple digits. I've seen people sent to the hospital with heatstroke. A lot of us will run into the freezer for a few minutes until we cool down. I'm not a doctor and I can't say for sure, but I'm fairly certain that going from overheated to a minus-5 environment can't be healthy.

My arms and hands are covered in scars from the fryers. Oil at nearly 400 degrees doesn't tickle when it hits your

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skin, and you can't avoid the spatter entirely. I've burned my hands because the oven gloves had worn through and the owners were too cheap to spring for another pair. I've sliced my fingers open nearly to the bone when knives have slipped. I've dropped equipment on my feet because it was so busy I didn't have time to wash the grease off my hands. I've hurt myself in more ways than I can count because that was how I got my seven or eight bucks an hour.

Stuff like that is unavoidable; it's the nature of the work. We know and understand that when we take the jobs. Any dangerous job is like that; we're not stupid. The point is more that the risk is devalued—that our injuries, rather than being seen as a sign of our willingness to literally bleed for our employers, are seen as a liability.

The kitchen scars are more dramatic, but the emotional toll of retail is the worst. The conditions are patently impossible. I've been expected to spend three hours per shift stocking in the back, while also being told that the register was never to be left unattended. I've been told to always have coffee ready for customers and that it should always be fresh, and in the same breath been told that I was going through too much coffee. My section of the store is always supposed to be neat, but there's only one of me and over three hundred square feet to cover, and there are shoppers everywhere and not enough racks for all this shit to begin with.

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My shoe size actually changed with the quality of the jobs I've had. The better ones let me sit down sometimes. At the not-so-nice ones, I've stood for eight to ten hours, and my feet have gotten so swollen that my shoes don't fit.

The mandatory cheerleading is why I never worked for Walmart. Apparently this has changed now, but during employee meetings, they used to require their people to actually cheer. With pelvic thrusting. (Go watch the YouTube videos. It must be seen to be believed.) In those not long ago days, if you didn't wiggle your ass with sufficient vigor, you'd find yourself on the wrong side of management and then brought to the front to lead the cheer yourself. Sure, give me a W and an A and an L and a squiggly (or I guess now it's an asterisk since they rebranded), and I will happily shove them straight up your ass. Friends of mine will swear that they never got demerits until after they upset management by lacking enthusiasm. (To be fair to Wal\*Mart, my friends weren't actually let go because they wouldn't wiggle enough. They can't prove causation. It's just that they didn't start getting demerits until they stopped wiggling.)

At work, I'm often told what words to say, and I will be written up if I deviate from the script or combine two steps to save time. In retail, we must acknowledge a customer who comes within a set radius of us with a certain tone and tenor in our voices. In telemarketing, our every word might be scripted. In fast food, we're typically given three greetings

to choose from. At one large fast-food chain (let's call it LFC for short), the choices were these:

- 1) Welcome to LFC, how can I help you?
- 2) Welcome to LFC, would you like to try a delicious chicken meal today for only \$4.99?
- 3) Welcome to LFC, what can we make fresh for you today?

The company even sent in undercover customers to make sure we stayed on script.

All of our actions are carefully dictated to us. I assume this is because employers think we have monkey brains and are incapable of making decisions. This means that they're paying me to pretend I'm not me and also that I care about you.

And as long as we're on the topic of insane things your bosses can do, you should be aware that you have no legal right to take breaks in America. Go ahead, Google it. Some states mandate breaks. Some farmwork has a federal break mandate. But overall, you've no right to demand a lunch break or a break at all. That's all at the discretion of your employer.

Some people have the luxury of asking themselves whether a job fulfills their career hopes and ambitions. I've got my own metric to gauge the fabulousity of a job: Does that

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job require me to keep my boss informed of the inner workings of my gastrointestinal system, or am I allowed to go to the bathroom at will? It's physically uncomfortable to hold it forever, and it sucks to stand by for the okay like a dog waiting for someone to open the door. But for me, the indignity of the whole thing is less about the potential bladder infections. It's more what the requirement for that kind of notification reveals about the tone of the place. In my experience, the jobs where the boss regulates your urinary tract also tend to demand a bunch of other degrading stuff.

We all know that a lot of folks think that poor people are lazy and incompetent. They think we get fired from jobs because we don't know how to behave, or we're always late, or we just don't care. But what rich people don't realize is how unbelievably easy it is to get fired. And a lot of times what gets you fired is that you're working more than one job.

Whenever you are working for the kind of place that has a corporate office, you're typically given the fewest possible hours—definitely less than full-time, because then they'd have to pay you benefits. (Full-time is often in the twenty-eight- to thirty-two-hours-a-week range, to boot.) But even though your employer might schedule you for twenty hours a week, you might wind up working ten, or thirty. It depends

on how busy it is—when it's slow, they send you home, and when it's busy, they expect you to stay late. They also expect you to be able to come in to cover someone's shift if a co-worker gets sick at the last minute. Basically, they're expecting you to be available to work all the time. Scheduling is impossible.

At one chain, I was required to sign a contract stating that I was an at-will employee, that I would be part-time with no benefits, and that if I took another job without permission, I would be subject to termination because the company expected me to be able to come in whenever they found it necessary. And yes, this is legal in the United States of America.

It's unavoidable; even I have had to admit the impossibility of this system and let people go, one an employee that I actually liked very much. Competent, friendly, good sense of humor. But her other boss simply would not post the schedule far enough in advance for me to give the woman any hours. If the workweek started Monday, the schedule at her other job went up Sunday night. I tried to do my scheduling a week or more in advance, and when I called the other restaurant to discuss the issue, the manager told me that she didn't actually feel any need to change her routines and that it was my problem to deal with. I simply had to let the woman go, because her other boss wanted the availability.

How is that legal, you ask? Well, a huge number of jobs

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in this country—and a crazy high percentage of the jobs that poor people hold down—are considered at-will. Sometimes you'll sign a paper stating that you understand what that means, sometimes not. It depends on the sophistication and size of the business hiring you. What "at-will" means is that your boss can decide that your eyes are too brown one day and let you go on the spot. As long as they're not in violation of civil rights law, they don't have to give you a reason, and they can decide that anything is a fireable offense. I've been fired because my boss made a mistake on some paperwork. I've been fired because I had the flu. I've been fired because I wouldn't sleep with someone. I've been fired because I *did* sleep with someone. I once saw a stripper fired because she couldn't afford breast implants and the club manager didn't find her natural breasts alluring enough to dance topless for drunken construction workers.

So let's break this down: You're poor, so you desperately need whatever crappy job you can find, and the nature of that crappy job is that you can be fired at any time. Meanwhile, your hours can be cut with no notice, and there's no obligation on the part of your employer to provide severance regardless of why, how, or when they let you go. And we wonder why the poor get poorer?

Of course not every firing is part of an intricate plot by the plutocrats. I've also been fired for calling off work too much ("calling off work," for those unfamiliar with the

vernacular, just means that you call your boss to say you're not coming in). Usually I've called off because I was legitimately sick, because I rarely miss work more than I can help. But sometimes it was because my car wouldn't start or because I just couldn't face it. It doesn't matter what you say, and your boss doesn't care; the point is whether you do it too much, not whether your reasons are legit.

I admit it—I've been fired for doing some stupid shit. I've been fired for consistent tardiness because I simply didn't care, and more than once because I gave my boss the finger. And as a manager, I've fired people for being dumbasses—stuff like showing up to work too hung over to stand up straight. Once I had to fire a guy because he went and got knuckle tattoos. I've even fired someone for relentless creepiness. That was the one time I thanked God for at-will states. He wasn't a terrible worker, and there was nothing to point to, but he did brush his groin with his hand once too often while looking at the girls up front.

Idiot pranks are risky too. One kid I worked with got bored and built a castle out of cardboard boxes in the parking lot. They fired him a) because it made the company "look unprofessional," and b) for "time theft." I've seen someone get fired, no shit, because he didn't want to wear buttons proclaiming him proficient at cleaning and other menial tasks. I barely made it through the day without mentioning



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TPS reports. (If you don't know what those are, drop everything and go watch *Office Space* right now.)

Mostly, I've fired people because they didn't care about the things that do matter to me. I've never cared any more for the owners of the companies I've worked for than they have for me, but I will kill myself for my co-workers. A lot of us do that. When we work through fevers and injuries and bone weariness, it's for the money but also because if we don't, we know that we'll be leaving our co-workers holding the bag. However bad the shift is, with a man down, it'll be that much worse on whoever's left. There's a siege mentality in the service industry in particular; you go through hell together. If you tap out and go home, you're leaving your co-workers to deal with more customers with even fewer hands. And that means that they're more likely to get fired themselves—because if customers start complaining about the service, the boss doesn't really care that you're covering for someone who's out sick. So you bet your sweet ass that if you work for me and I see you being dead weight, I'll get rid of you.

All of this is not to cast myself as some kind of paragon of work perfection. I'm a terrible corporate manager, every time I tried it. My employees loved me, but I made a lousy guardian of profit margins. My first loyalty is to my co-workers. Then the customers. And then, in a distant third, the company.

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For example, when I found out that some of my employees had themselves a fantastic gig pulling the expired salaries and bruised or unusable produce out of the Dumpster and taking it home, I started making sure that the food was disposed of *next to* the trash rather than in it. This, you should know, was highly against the rules on everyone's part.

I figured if I got busted, I'd just say that I was trying to keep track of how much got thrown away to help me order properly the next time. I'm not sure what the company would have done if they'd found out; most companies simply don't want to know about stuff like that because even they don't want to be that harsh, but liability exists. No restaurant can knowingly allow anyone to eat expired food, even if it's obviously still sound. With that said, companies also discourage letting employees eat unservable food because they assume that a worker would have bought food instead of just going without, and heaven knows it's a sin to lose potential profits from workers! Only, most people don't buy their food half-off at their own stores; most people just drink more on hungry shifts when they can't eat. I always figured that my cooks would probably not be doing their best work if they were salivating every time some food finished cooking. And I just couldn't live with myself letting these guys look longingly at the burgers they were flipping as if they were Victorian street urchins lusting after a hot roll in a bakery window.

If one of my people was hungry, I gave them food. I'd

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send parents home with boxes of expired chicken nuggets for their kids. My bosses, of course, generally hated dealing with me. It's been a pattern. I don't really blame them—their jobs sucked as much as mine did and I was a huge pain in their asses. One of my favorite bosses once told me that he hated having to explain the *why* of everything to me, but I considered it my job to be able to explain the why to the people who reported to me. If hours were getting cut or pay frozen, I damn well was going to give them a reason that made sense. If we were going to lay off a quarter of the staff, I'd better be able to explain it.

I know a lot of people think that I'm supposed to be a good little worker bee and do my part to help move the wheels of capitalism. I just don't see what's in it for me anymore beyond my little paycheck. Think about it this way: At my earning peak, I made approximately nineteen cents a minute before taxes.

So when I go out of my way to work hard, I'm not doing it for my bosses, I'm doing it for my co-workers. There's definitely a mutual covering of asses going on in the lower classes. (Hey, why should the upper classes do all the ass covering?) I've even tracked down babysitters for employees who'd lost their child care and couldn't afford to lose their shift as well. Instead of letting an employee call off work and winding up shorthanded to boot, I called around until I found a cashier who was more than happy to babysit for a

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few hours for some extra cash. I loaned the cook the money to pay the cashier, and everyone got something they needed. We do shit like that a lot.

We'd never survive otherwise.

Once I'm home from my shift, I try not to be short-tempered with my husband, whose fault my bad mood decidedly isn't. In turn, he tries not to be short-tempered with me. Working at a low-wage job means getting off work and having just enough mental energy to realize what you could be doing with your life . . . if only you could work up the will to physically move.

And honestly, I wouldn't even mind the degradations of my work life so much if the privileged and powerful were honest about it. If they just admitted that this is simply impossible. Instead, we're told to work harder and be grateful we have jobs, food, and a roof over our heads. And for fuck's sake, we are. But in exchange for all that work we're doing, and all our miserable work conditions, we're not allowed to demand anything in return. No sense of accomplishment, or respect from above, or job security. We are expected not to feel entitled to these things. Being poor while working hard is fucking crushing. It's living in a nightmare where the walls just never stop closing in on you.

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I resent the fuck out of it every time my schedule's been cut and then I've been called in for tons of extra hours, as though my time weren't worth anything, just so that my boss can be sure not to pay me for a minute that I'm not absolutely necessary. I resent signing away my ability to get a second job and being told that I can't work more than twenty-eight hours a week either.

The result of all of this? I just give up *caring* about work. I lose the energy, the bounce, the willingness. I'll perform as directed, but no more than that. I've rarely had a boss who gave me any indication that he valued me more highly than my uniform—we were that interchangeable—so I don't go out of my way for my bosses either. The problem I have isn't just being undervalued—it's that it feels as though people go out of their way to make sure you know how useless you are.

I'd been working for one company for over a year when I injured myself at work in November and had to go on leave for two months because I couldn't stand for long. So I wasn't invited to the company Christmas party. I went as a co-worker's date and watched as everyone got their Christmas bonuses. I didn't get one; I was technically not in the managerial position and thus didn't qualify. The fact that I'd worked the rest of the year didn't count.

What really got me, though, was when the owner of the company thanked the woman who was filling in for me for working so hard all year. He didn't recognize me at all.

With unwavering support like that, it's not really a mystery why I've rarely felt huge personal drive to make more money for the people signing my checks. I'm as loyal as they pay me to be, basically. Most of the people I know are the same way. It's only logical. See, if we perform really well, give it a full 120 percent, we might make shift manager. That's a whole extra \$2 an hour. For that \$2 or so, we get to be in the direct line of fire for the profit margins. We get to be held responsible for things outside our control.

And we get to be stuck.

If you're working at your typical service job, shift manager is about as high as you can get, because for every four or six shift managers, there's only one general manager position. But let's say that the company treats everyone so poorly that turnover is high. Then you might make assistant or even general manager, at which point you'll earn somewhere between \$20,000 and \$35,000 in exchange for physically punishing, emotionally draining eighty- or ninety-hour weeks. (Salaries in cities are generally higher, but both companies I worked for capped out in the mid-\$30,000 range.) I'll put it this way: As general manager for a chain restaurant, I got eight days of maternity leave after I had my second daughter. Unpaid.

It's not like we don't wish for more, but really, what's the better option? School is an investment that doesn't make sense for people who aren't the academic sort. You have to

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pay cash money for it, you can't hold down as many hours at work, it's harder to find work because your schedule's inflexible, and dear God the cost of textbooks is enough to kill you. Hell, I *am* the academic sort, and for many years school wasn't a good investment for me. It left me in debt with nothing to show for it.

Before I moved into the service economy, I tried to make a more fulfilling, less backbreaking living working in political organizing. To be clear: The jobs that I worked at in politics weren't exactly highly paid either. They were typically in the \$8 to \$10 hourly range. I laughed my ass off when people went digging through my financial history after my essay on poverty was published and found the Federal Election Commission filings of my political pay. (Pro tip for amateur PI sorts: Those numbers? That's how much I got for the *whole year*, not per paycheck. Seriously, how much do you really think they pay someone to knock on doors or coordinate other people doing it?) The dark truth of many fulfilling, creative jobs and industries is that you are expected to accept very little pay at the start, just for the privilege of learning the ropes and working your way up. And that's fine if you've got Mom and Dad helping you. But if not, you tend not to go into those fields. Which means that the people who do go into those fields are often pretty privileged; not many Congressional staffers come out of the lower class.

And it's not just about how little you are paid in fields like

politics. It's also the stuff you're expected to do in addition. For example, there are constant training sessions during the off-season. Most of them cost money and are held in Washington, DC. All of my friends who still work in politics went to them. I didn't. All of my friends who took short-term, low-pay jobs with people who could be mentors are still working in politics. I had to turn those jobs down—the ones I was offered, anyway. Often I didn't even bother to send in my résumé in the first place, because I knew I couldn't afford to work for so little. Mostly, I found myself perpetually stuck on the bottom rung, watching people I'd started out with vault above me because they weren't doing anything but this and they could afford to take the financial hits while they were paying their dues.

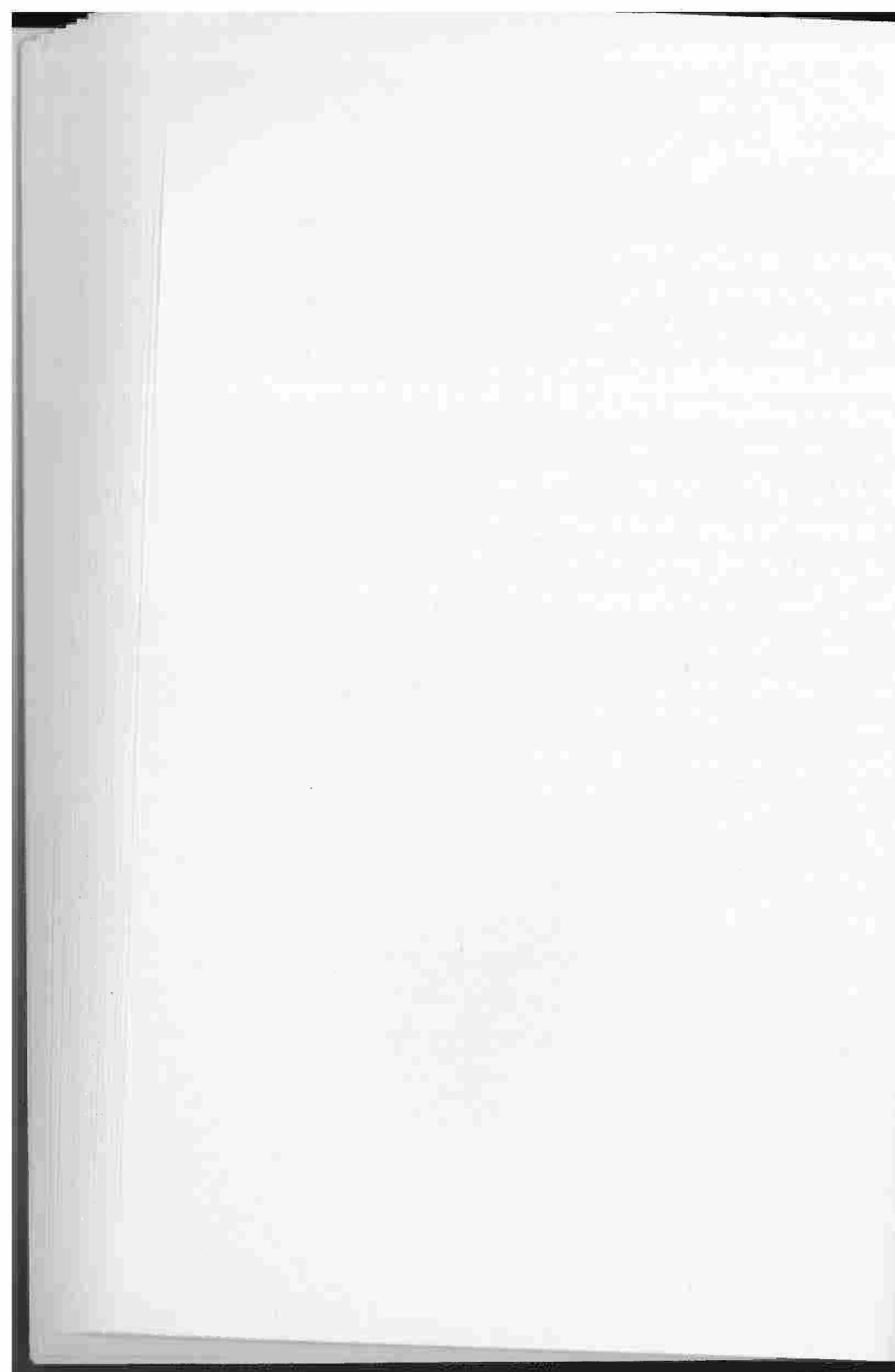
Here's another thing the poor can't afford: unpaid internships. I've had to turn down offers that might have improved my circumstances in the long run because I just couldn't afford to work for nothing. Again, the people who can afford unpaid internships are getting help from home—in my world, everyone else has to work for a living. And this means that we're being cut out of all that potential networking too. That's at least one reason why I've never had much of a professional network—I never had the chance to build one. Accepting an unpaid internship, or one of those internships that basically pays you lunch money, is for people who don't have to pay the rent.



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Because I've always been in a take-what-you-can-get situation, I've wound up working the sorts of jobs that people consider beneath them. And yet people still wonder why we, working at the bottom, aren't putting our souls into our jobs. In turn, I wonder about people who think that those who are poor shouldn't demand reciprocity from their employers. We should devote ourselves to something that doesn't benefit us more than it absolutely has to? We're meant to care about their best interests, but they don't have to care about ours? If you're going to put as little as possible into my training and wages, if you're going to make sure that I can't get enough hours to survive in order to avoid giving me health care, and generally make sure that I'm as uncomfortable as possible at any given time just to make sure I know my place, then how can you expect me to care about your profit margin?

Remember, you get what you pay for.

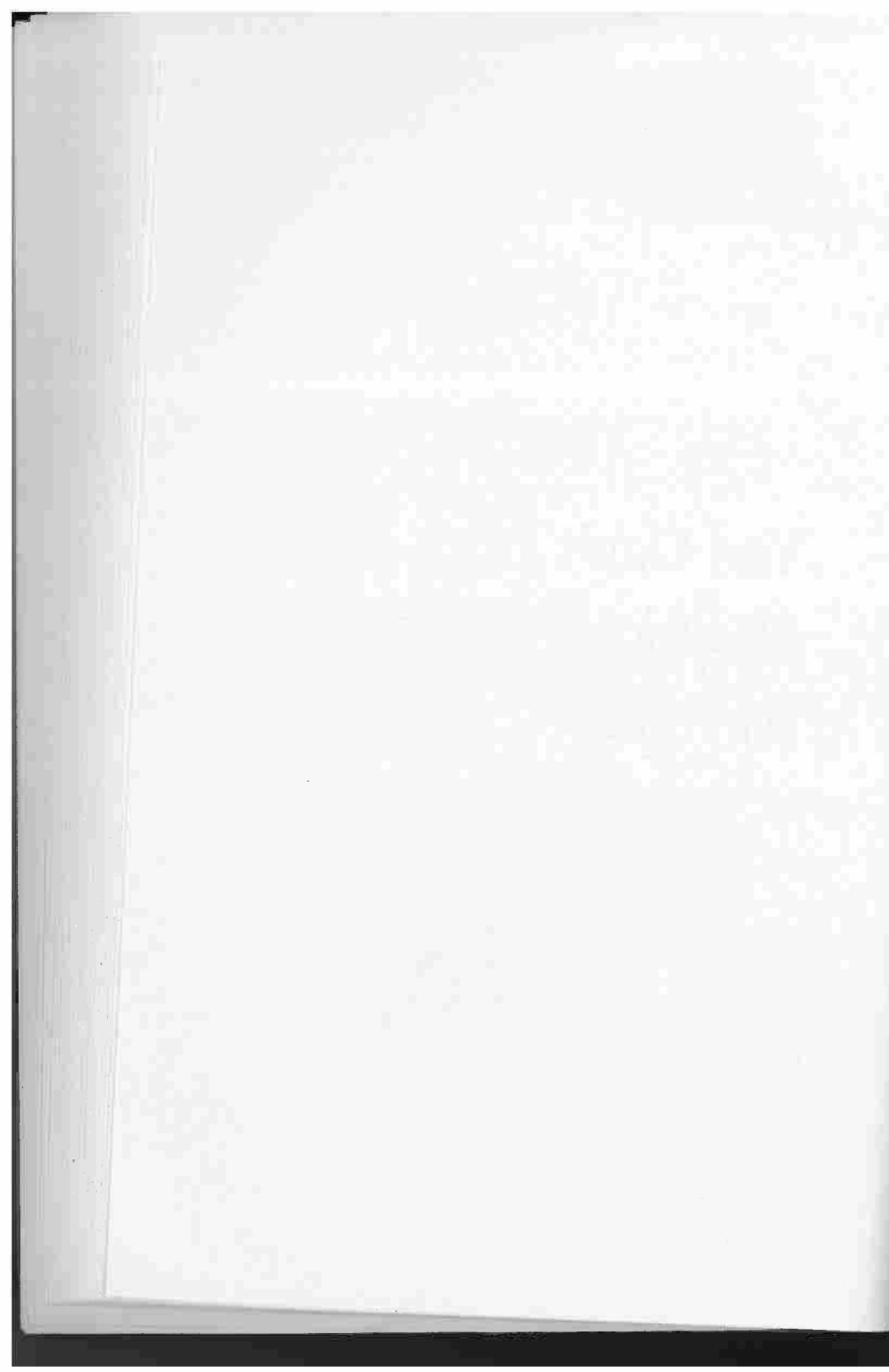


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You Can't Pay a  
Doctor in Chickens  
Anymore

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*E*xcruciating should be defined in the dictionary as an exposed nerve. Once I killed nearly a whole bottle of vodka in the space of a night, and I'm not a frequent drinker. I was at least six shots gone before the pain started to fade into blessed numbness.

It took me a few years of the long slide into poverty to cotton on to the unavailability of anything besides crisis medical care. I'd come from a home in which we went to the doctor when we needed to. Dad had benefits. It never occurred to me as a kid to question it. And it took me a while as an adult to understand that without benefits, which no longer come standard-issue with your average job like they used to, hospital administrators would rather you die on the

street than sully their expensive sheets. (And the sheets are expensive. Like the Tylenol. Whole books have been written about that, and I can't do the subject justice in a few paragraphs, but don't think we don't know that they charge us triple for those lifesaving medications because we are not rich enough to have other rich people negotiate better prices for us.)

Being healthy and being poor are generally mutually exclusive conditions. We all have physical weaknesses, but a rich person gets these tended to before they get out of control. Poor people don't have that luxury. So it's pretty enraging to poor people when rich people, who get preventive care and can afford vitamins and gym memberships, look down on us as if we don't have a clue how to take care of our bodies. We know—we just can't afford it.

Dentistry is one of the things we are most lacking in. And it's one of the most glaring marks of poverty. I watch the tooth-bleaching ads and cringe, because I know exactly what I'm being pegged as. Incapable. Uneducated. Oblivious. What I should be pegged as: uninsured, and until recently, uninsurable.

I did get some dental surgery once. I had five teeth pulled and a partial denture built so that at least I would have front

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teeth. I think I was nearly twenty-six at the time. I made an appointment, which took all the force of will I had. I got in the chair at the office, and promptly listened to forty-five straight minutes of the most upsetting, judgmental lecture I'd ever received in my life. This woman, the dentist, decided that I must be on meth. (I'd like to make this point clear: I have never in my life done meth. Ever. Other drugs, sure, but not this one in particular. It seems to me that because I have failed so much, been weak so often, I am prouder of those things I have managed to avoid. It's doubly bad, then, to be accused of the things you *haven't* done.)

Never mind that I had none of the other signs of being a meth addict; my skin, while not exactly in great shape, lacks the *huge fucking sores* you get while on meth. My face, while much slimmer in recent years, isn't skeletal. I'm sometimes a bit energetic, but I'm never tweaked-out twitchy. In short, calling me a meth user because I have bad teeth is about as valid as calling me a genius because I'm a fast reader.

This dentist had come to her decision, though, no matter what I said. She made a point of telling me that they didn't make dentures as discolored as I'd need and that I'd have to get used to having everyone see how dark my teeth were in comparison with these shiny white front teeth I'd have on the right side. She told me all this, with her poky metal shit in my mouth, and I wondered whether she was intentionally hitting the sore spots. I'm sure she dispensed actual medical

advice at some point, but I stopped listening. Instead, I wondered whether she'd bother to take out all the bone fragments that needed removing or whether she'd just let them heal over and cause me trouble. I wondered how many people came back for this kind of idiocy.

So I had my surgery, got a denture plate in place of my front teeth, and never went back. Call it weakness, call it cowardice, it'd be true. There is a shred of dignity that I will not let go of. I will not intentionally put myself in that situation again.

And that's why I don't like dentists. I have never in my life felt more attacked, more vulnerable, trashier than I did in that dentist's chair. At least when people on the Internet call you a meth user, you can console yourself with the fact that these people are idiots, as evidenced by the fact that they have nothing better to do than cast aspersions at strangers online. When a dentist does it, drill in hand, it's impossible not to worry that maybe that person is a serial killer, and fuck that. Not doing it again. Not even risking it. And it's not like there's a huge pool of dentists out there who will treat someone like me on a payment plan. I can't just shop around until I find one with a decent bedside manner.

My denture from that surgery broke about two years later. It just snapped while I was trying to eat a hamburger, separating the plate that fits on the roof of my mouth from the actual visible teeth part. I superglued it together for a



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while, until it wore down around the raw edges and wouldn't fit properly. Now I just use a lot of dental paste and try to never consume anything in front of another human.

So that was kind of awful. Worse, my teeth are actually one of the things I can honestly say aren't my fault. My destroyed teeth are the result of a car accident nearly a decade ago, in which the other driver was drunk and high and had been busted for those things so many times they'd revoked his license. There was no question of liability.

I was in the passenger seat because I hate driving in cities and always let others take that honor if possible, and my jaw hit the dash so hard I exploded the airbag. Over time it became clear that I had nearly exploded my jaw along with it.

I had car insurance, sure, but it only covered liability and uninsured drivers. (Thank God for *that* extra five bucks in coverage a month!) I needed a car to get to work. So when the insurance company offered me a settlement check, I didn't think twice about signing the waiver (which, it turned out, meant that I had no right to future damages). I took it and bought another car. I didn't realize that check would be it—that there was no more money coming to take care of the damage the other driver had done to *me*. I thought they were just separate claims or something. I'd never filed a major insurance claim before; I had no idea what I was doing.

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So that's how I found myself with a mouthful of fucked-up teeth and no resources to deal with them. Truthfully, even if I'd known what that waiver meant, I'm not sure that I'd have made a different decision. If it was a choice between my teeth and my car, I had to choose the car. I could survive with bad teeth, but I'd starve and lose my apartment without a car to get me to and from work. That said, I never would have imagined that dental care wouldn't be something I'd have access to for nearly a decade.

So I got the car (which turned out to be a lemon, *because of course it did*) and kept working, and over the years my teeth have continued to decay. I've brushed, flossed, rinsed religiously. And the cavities spread regardless. I bought a Waterpik. I bought made-for-TV mouth-cleaning tools.

Nothing helps.

My teeth are, since my story went viral, a thing I now talk about. But until the moment that I went full fuck-you gutterpunk and took them out for the whole Internet's viewing to underscore the effect of my dental problems, I hid them. I spent years learning to speak with my mouth closed, learning how to fake eat in public when I couldn't avoid it. I rarely told anyone when my mouth was hurting. It's not like I have an option now, but there's nothing that shames me more than acknowledging that I have failed at this too—this basic idea of keeping your own bones and enamel to yourself, of *having* them at all. Nothing is worse than eating in

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public, because I mostly can't eat with my broken denture in. I usually eat alone, at night, tearing off bits of food and bolting them down without chewing whenever my stomach tells me that it can't wait any longer. There is no joy in food for me anymore; it is a necessary evil, something I consume to stay alive but lacking in anything like taste or texture. I don't eat much.

I've lost a lot of weight. People keep asking me how I've done it, and I always wonder what I should say. Mostly, I tell them that it's just losing baby fat now that I am out of my twenties. Sometimes I seriously consider telling them that they really ought to try a nice strong periodontal disease (it does *wonders* for your thighs!).

I don't smile. Someone found a picture of me smiling from back in 2006, before my front teeth went and a wisdom tooth cracked off. It is one of the last times I smiled on camera, if not *the* last. I don't allow people to take my picture anymore because nobody can ever just take a picture. Everyone wants you to grin like an insane person. They will cajole and wheedle and bring the whole group photo to a screeching halt until you finally, shamefully, admit that you can't, that you don't want a picture of you like this to exist. Or you have to be an ass, irrationally angry about a seemingly innocuous request. That'll get you out of it too. I actually don't mind being in pictures and I wish I had more to remember my friends and milestones with, but I've spent

the better part of a decade telling everyone that I have a huge aversion, that it's best not to ask or expect, because I don't want to deal with the inevitable "Smile!"

Actually, never smiling has had an interesting impact on my life. I can't repress laughing with my friends, the people who are safe, who can see a broken mouth and not notice it. But among people who don't know me, about half of my jokes fall flat, because I am not doing the human thing and grinning my way through, making clear that my dry observation is meant to be amusing rather than cutting. So I learned to stop telling jokes, because while I have a lively sense of humor, I can't properly express it with my face.

It even messes with my relationships. My husband, for obvious reasons, would like to kiss me. I, for obvious reasons, feel like kissing is the anti-sex; once I have been reminded that I have teeth, I cease feeling anything like alluring.

My teeth have become one of my most hated obsessions. I'm constantly reminding myself to keep my fucking mouth shut (which has its side benefits in that never shutting up has been a problem for me in my life) and to make sure my denture is adjusted properly so I don't have weird sunken-mouth lips. I have two broken-to-the-point-of-missing teeth that are visible on the right top side, and I use cotton wadding to cover that as far as the basic "something vaguely whitish that has mass" concerns. I worry at my teeth with

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my tongue, testing which are still sound enough to masticate should I be caught in a rare public eating situation. I take prophylactic ibuprofen so the swelling doesn't get out of control. There's no good way to predict the swelling, and once it's started, the pain isn't quite the worst, but your productivity is pretty much gone for the day. As soon as the swelling sets in, there isn't much you can do besides hold ice to your cheek and pray.

When I was in acute pain, before I learned better, I used to go to urgent care or the ER. A lot of urgent cares won't dispense painkillers. My guess has always been that they assume you're an addict or a seller. In the ER, I think they figure that the wait and the bills are enough to deter most abusers, so they'll give you a day or maybe two of real no-shit medicine to get you through a few days' work. To get any sort of actual medicinal regimen, you have to have an actual doctor, a general practitioner. I don't have time to chase down a doctor's appointment when I'm in pain.

So why, I am asked, have I simply not gone to one of the free dental clinics? Well, because they aren't exactly flinging their doors open. I've researched some programs, looking for anyone who could help. Sometimes I am too rich, because I have a job at all. Sometimes I live in the wrong county, and the grant providing the funds is restricted to residents of the next county. A few times I've been unable to take off enough time from work to make it to where the clinic is, much less

to do it for the multiple visits required to complete the job. Twice I've been told that they don't do critical cases, or basic cleanings and fillings, both of which are laughably inadequate at this point. So I have carried on, hoping to get dental insurance at some point. What I refused to confront or articulate for years was that it was likely I'd simply wind up being one of those gross people with no teeth. Probably by the age of thirty-five.

But rationality rarely enters into health care. Mostly, at least for me, medicine has been a patchwork of what I can do around when I really can't avoid seeking care for a second time or longer. And most of my interactions with the health care industry have pretty much made me want to avoid it all together more from then on. ER visits usually involve waiting for hours and then being handed a couple of ibuprofen for my trouble. And the whole time I'm waiting for those ibuprofen I get to wonder what the bill's going to come out to and whether I should stay and wait longer or just go home and hope for the best.

Look, I'm not stupid. I can *be* stupid, but I'm usually fairly savvy. I can read at a college level. I can do complex math problems given enough time and scratch paper. But I had trouble finding medical care.

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Well, scratch that. I have had trouble finding *decent* medical care. It's why I didn't have prenatal care for my eldest daughter. I found out I was pregnant in October, days before the last election I ever worked on. I had a suspicion I was pregnant—I mean, that's why I'd peed on seven pregnancy sticks, all of which had turned out positive. But I couldn't bring myself to believe the results, since I'd been told so many times that it was practically impossible for me to get pregnant. I made a command decision that all those store-bought tests had to have been defective. So I went to the local Planned Parenthood and requested a blood test. But after the nurse heard about all the tests I'd already taken she just laughed and went straight for an ultrasound. Sure enough, within three seconds she told me that I was already six weeks gone.

I didn't think about the pregnancy much to begin with; I had a job to finish, then we'd sort out what to do next. I knew that I'd be facing weeks of unemployment after Election Day, and I could sort out prenatal and baby products and such then. The pregnancy prompted our decision to send my husband to school; we'd been thinking about it since he came home from Iraq, and it seemed as good a time as any to have a guaranteed income. The GI Bill, along with paying for tuition, pays a living stipend. It would just cover all of our expenses if we were careful. I could stay home with the baby until I was ready to go back to work, and then

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we'd be in a decent position until he graduated. The stipend wasn't so much that we wouldn't qualify for Medicaid, so the birth itself would be covered.

It didn't exactly go according to plan. First, we qualified for Medicaid, and I started looking for an OB. There weren't a ton of doctors accepting new Medicaid patients. Planned Parenthood doesn't do prenatal care. I found my clinic through a flyer, advertising that it did in fact accept Medicaid and was enrolling NOW! In the waiting room for my first appointment, I realized that I was at a faith-based clinic. It was a church ministry.

Now, normally I'm cool with the Jesus folks doing the poor-people tending. It's sort of their mandate, and I honestly do not care about the religious beliefs of anyone willing to make sure my kid gestates properly. But there are the charities that happen to be church-run, and then there are the church charities. I was at one of the latter. That distinction is important: Some ministries are set up by churches to provide a service, and some seem to be set up to proselytize, tacking the service on as an afterthought.

When I showed up, I was ushered into an office, where I did the initial paperwork and learned about all the things the woman helping me praised Jesus for. Her pencil didn't break, praise Jesus. The weather was decent, praise Jesus. I honestly do not know what was in the paperwork she was walking me through; I was much too fascinated by this per-



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son who was nearly finished with the third page, praise Jesus.

After that, I was taken to an exam room, where I was greeted by a lovely young woman who took my blood pressure and asked me if I had a church home. She was followed by a nurse who told me that Jesus had a plan for this baby and congratulated me on making the decision to bear it. I asked about maybe getting another ultrasound—my weird hormones and the sudden ability to bear children had me freaking out that this kid wasn't viable, and I was terrified of coming to terms with having a child only to discover that it wouldn't make it. But I was told that they only did ultrasounds in the third trimester unless there was a problem.

And that was the end of my appointment. No reassurance, no actual medical advice, no real exam. Just some routine tests and the clear message that Jesus wanted me to have this baby. I, certain that Jesus also wanted me to have an ultrasound and pretty sure that I could manage a pregnancy just as well without that sort of help, never went back. There didn't seem to be much point in returning to a place that gave no better advice than to drink a lot of water and not get into a hot tub, which were both helpfully bullet-pointed on the packet of papers they sent home with me.

I did take a few stabs at finding a different clinic. The ones with open spots didn't take Medicaid, and the ones that accepted Medicaid were full. So instead, I read a lot of

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books, called all of my old friends who had kids, and compulsively Googled things to find out whether they were normal or whether I should present myself at the ER. Eventually, I did just that when my daughter finally decided to arrive.

Any hospital in a large city is used to random pregnant women showing up to give birth. I think, though, that most of them have a doctor. They wanted to know who mine was, and I told them that I was pretty sure whoever was on call that night would be my doctor.

I actually don't remember most of the process. I was in a room, then another room, and I was kind of too busy being in labor to really care what was happening. Tom took care of the paperwork; we gave them the Medicaid card and that was pretty much it. Then I had a baby. I think the process was probably streamlined given that there was going to be a baby soon whether or not the paperwork was done, and they much preferred that I give birth in the birthing room instead of in the waiting room, where it would be rather hard to clean up afterward.

We were visited by social workers a lot in the next days. I don't know what all I filled out; they showed up at random times. If I was awake, they had me fill out paperwork. If I was asleep, they woke me and had me fill out paperwork. I'd failed to plan ahead and bring pay stubs with me, which the lady was kind of miffed about, so I had to bring those in later.

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I've been called crazy. It's not untrue. I suffer from a syndrome called We Don't Know What the Fuck Your Damage Is. That is to say, I've been diagnosed with so many things that it's impossible to tell what's likely the real problem. I mean, clearly I struggle. Things that are simple for most people don't come naturally to me. I have trouble bending my will to anyone, including myself. I'm reckless and impulsive. I'm irrational and prone to anger when I am in certain moods, and those moods occur more frequently than you'd expect. I go through depressive phases, lasting days or months, and I can destroy my entire life through sheer inattention in three weeks flat, because even if you can't muster the energy or the will to open your mail, they still want the money for the bills. At times I'm an insomniac, and at others I can't get out of bed. None of these things are typically so bad for me as to be unmanageable, but managing them sometimes doesn't leave much room for anything else.

It's not like mental health clinics are thick on the ground, like the people who need their services. Being poor in and of itself is an aggravating factor in a lot of mental illnesses; the stress is pretty brutal. If you're already kind of fragile, it can be really rough. I won't say that a good clinic for poor people doesn't exist somewhere, but I've never found a mental

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health professional who was willing or able to deal with one of the parts I needed to fix, the insomnia and paralysis and depression (at least some of which is situational, and I'll discuss that more in Chapter 4).

When I have sought treatment for these things, the professionals seem to only want to talk about my anger. They talk about my fatalism, my caustic outlook. They see these things as problems to be fixed. Personally, I think that anger is the only rational response to my world sometimes, but when you're asking for services, you don't get to pick what they treat you for. Either you agree with them or you're labeled uncooperative and kicked out of the program.

The last time I found myself really struggling and went in, they told me that I would have to spend hours in treatment each week. And that was the only option. It was either that or no treatment at all. So I chose the latter. Now, to be fair, I showed up in a right state. I was having a bit of a meltdown because I was terrible at my job and putting in too many hours to be failing that hard, and my husband was having a rough patch, and the kids were sick, and I had just realized again that this was it, this was life, this was how it was going to be until I died. The best I could hope for was that not all of these things would happen at once too often. I can see them thinking I was seriously this critical all the time.

I went to the clinic hoping that I could develop a relation-

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ship with a therapist who would then be able to prescribe me the drugs that have made me competent and invulnerable, the ones that stave off emotional disaster so that I can simply get through the crunch. Even at my most breakdowny, I generally realize that I am reacting irrationally. What I need from the mental health system that I have never been able to get is just enough support to maintain.

What I need, what would probably actually improve my life outcome, is someone who I can call, can see frequently for short stretches when I've hit a rough patch, and can then not call when I'm okay. Someone who knows my history and won't question it when I call and ask, apropos of nothing, for something to help me sleep or avoid panic attacks. I need someone who's worked with me for long enough to understand that I don't really like medicine and that if I'm asking, it's serious. In short, I need the kind of mental health support that many people with quality insurance take for granted.

When I've had the guts to see a doctor about an ailment, I haven't had the access, and when I've had the access, I haven't had the guts. Until quite recently, I was scared to death that if a doctor ever did find something really wrong with me, I'd be *completely* uninsurable, so I never went to the ER for anything that wasn't obvious and small, like a bad flu or potentially broken ankle.

Mostly, if I'm honest, I've been scared of the *look*. It's in doctor's offices and around social workers where I get the

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lectures, the judgments, the stares. People treat me like I'm a fucking idiot, as though I am incapable of noticing this rather large problem, rather than incapable of addressing it before it becomes such a large problem.

I came in for a fair bit of judgment over a cyst I developed. Doctors assumed I was just too ignorant to notice it rather than the truth, which was that I lacked insurance and it wasn't life-threatening. I promise you, I was aware of the cyst I had for years. You can look up the gory details—it's called a pilonidal abscess. I think it's due to a tailbone injury I had as a teenager. A couple of times a year, my ass would swell and I'd smell like a rotting corpse for a few days in addition to the rather painful fact that I couldn't sit or stand in any position that didn't add to the pressure of the infection. It wasn't until just after my first daughter was born, when I had three months of Medicaid left, that I could have it excised. Prior to that, it landed me in the ER more than once, and every time, I'd be told patronizingly that I could simply have it taken care of, and probably should. Every time, I asked the doctor if they'd be willing to do the surgery at the rate I could afford; while I didn't have any takers, it did, at least, ensure that I didn't have to hear yet another explanation that surgery exists—as if it were something I'd never heard of simply because it was something I couldn't have.

Preventative medicine, man, it's a miracle. You can go to orthodontists and surgeons and eye doctors and rehab fa-

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cilities after you throw out your back so that you don't wind up bedridden and debilitated. You get antibiotics and painkillers and blood pressure medicine.

Seriously, vision care alone is a miracle that only happens to the rich, never mind the rest. They don't get deep forehead wrinkles at thirty from spending their twenties squinting, they don't get headaches that cause them to take a large amount of ibuprofen every day—which, as all the bottles are pretty clear on, can't be good for you. They can see something in the first second it comes into their field of vision instead of five seconds later. The glasses and the decent food and the orthodontists—all of those things require money.

There is a price point for good health in America, and I have rarely been able to meet it. I choose not to pursue treatment if it will cost me more than it will gain me, and my cost-benefit is done in more than dollars. I have to think of whether I can afford any potential treatment emotionally, financially, and timewise. I have to sort out whether I can afford to change my life enough to make any treatment worth it—I've been told by more than one therapist that I'd be fine if I simply reduced the amount of stress in my life. It's true, albeit unhelpful. Doctors are fans of telling you to sleep and eat properly, as though that were a thing one can simply do.

Now, I'm not saying the system doesn't work at all. I've

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had lifesaving treatment, like when my throat swelled so much they had to put a tube in it to keep me breathing. I've got friends who can leave their houses only because they found a program to get them a wheelchair. Many people have needs that the system is built to meet, and it does that fairly efficiently to the extent that there's money.

The trouble is that we've left so many holes in the safety net Moby-Dick could swim through it. The system can't support everyone who needs the help, and it's led to a patchwork of half-finished treatments and conflicting diagnoses. We have the technology. Maybe we can start using it? There are a lot of us that would be awfully pleased to get some antibiotics.



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I'm Not Angry  
So Much as I'm  
Really Tired

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Almost nothing is more degrading than standing in a welfare line. The people who are looking at you know exactly how much money you make, because they know how poor you have to be to qualify. And the workers are either lovely or the worst human beings you'd ever care to meet. I had a caseworker who called just to check in because she knew I'd gotten a new job. And I had one who ignored me completely, just had me sit silently at her desk until she needed me to verify my information. Then she ignored me some more, and then she told me I could go. I left, with no idea what had just happened. I called the state to find out what changes she'd made to my file the next day rather than speak up during that incredibly effective stonewall.

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I've felt the poorest with the people who were supposed to be helping me. I get that their jobs suck and they're overworked, but I go out of my way to not be another asshole customer. I have my paperwork and a list of questions ready to go. I have all my references, my pay stubs, medical bills, everything. Indexed. Sometimes I don't have a document, but then it's on my list of questions, to find out what I can use as a substitute. But often, none of that matters, because I am poor and asking for the benefits that I am qualified for and entitled to as a citizen, and in some people's eyes that makes me less than human.

Often enough, I *feel* less than human—or less than the human that I know myself to be. For example, I love to read. I'm a naturally curious person, apt to ask uncomfortable questions without realizing it because I just want to know something. But I don't read when I'm working at minimum wage or near it. I'm too tired. I fall asleep because the effort of moving my eyes across the page and processing information is simply too much; my brain won't allow me to use what little energy I have left on frivolities like self-improvement. It just wants me to stare blankly at a wall or flickering screen until I pass out.

Understand that when I say I am tired and in the same breath bitch about a lack of hours at work, it's because I'm counting the totality of the shit that I have to deal with while being poor. It is super-inconvenient, all the time.

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There's one episode of my life in particular that was just the worst. I was working two jobs, with no car. I lived two miles from one job and three miles from the other. It wasn't an inhuman amount of mileage; some people run that for fun. But then afterward, some people go home and relax.

So I'd get up in the morning, walk to work at about five a.m., and wait tables from six to about noon. I'd be home by about one, at which point I'd pass out unless I had errands to run. Then I'd get up at six, shower and fix my hair for the bar, walk three miles, tend bar until one or two in the morning, and either beg a ride from a co-worker or walk home. I'd get home at two or three, unwind, take a short nap, and start all over again.

Now, nobody can maintain that forever, and if I'd been lucky enough to get that many hours, I'd have been doing okay. The problem was that both these jobs were weekends or prime eating-out days only—three or sometimes four days each. So I'd spend Monday recuperating from the weekend, Tuesday trying to find better work (which also required more than a few miles of walking around dropping off applications), Wednesday taking care of the house, and Thursday taking a spare shift from one or the other job.

In other words, my commuting time was comparable to a typical suburbanite's: one, maybe two hours. Except mine was on foot, and it was to jobs at which I was on my feet all day. It's why I've never felt much need to exercise; I spend

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hours each day lifting heavy things and bending into impossible positions to get through stockrooms. I've stood and repeated so many times that I can assemble a cheeseburger in twenty seconds flat, assuming it's got multiple toppings. Less, if it's simple. You get plenty of miles in while running around a retail store or factory floor.

So I was either working or walking to or from work, about sixty hours every week. How did I spend my remaining time? Well, remember that I was walking. I lived in a fairly central location, but it was just about a mile or two from anything I needed, like a grocery store or a Laundromat. I did laundry twice over the weekend because I could make my clothes last two shifts but not three, so that was six hours. I went grocery shopping once a week, so that was four hours. I slept, so that was around fifty. I spent eight hours or so every week looking for work locally. I went to the unemployment office once a week to check the job boards, and that was five hours. I generally picked up a spare shift on Thursdays, so that was another six or so. I showered at least twice a day, what with all the walking, so that was about seven hours a week gone to washing or drying myself. And that leaves about three hours a day for everything else.

I was always and forever dreading the next time I'd have to get off the couch. I would finally sit down, and I would realize that if I had any hope of waking up at a reasonable hour tomorrow, I really did have to be in bed in three hours,

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and the dishes still needed to be done, and the toilet needed to be scrubbed, and I'd promised someone I'd make them dinner because I owed them and they got sick and called in the favor.

When some wealthier people sense an unwillingness in lower-paid workers to move faster than they absolutely have to, or to do much of anything with their free time, it's because we are marshaling our resources. We're not lazy; we're stockpiling leisure while we can. I can't tolerate more mental exercise after a full day of logistics and worry. Full capacity just isn't an option.

We start the day with a deficit. Most poor people don't wake up feeling refreshed and rested. When I wake up in the morning, I'm in pain. If it's ragweed or wood-burning season, I wake up with insane headaches. If I'm spared that, there's still my aching back, stiff from a night on a mattress that was worn out long ago. There's not a moment in my life that my mouth doesn't hurt; my tongue is raw from touching broken teeth and my jaw isn't any happier about them. (I fully realize that some of the trouble is that I don't know how bad I feel. There's no baseline, no normal "healthy" to compare an average day with.)

I'm not trying to say that only poor people feel pain. The point here is that life is a bit peachier if you have medicine or are under a doctor's supervision to treat these things. Allergies are less severe if you get allergy shots. My headaches

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are partially due to my jaw-teeth trouble. I realize the aging process would suck enough on its own—I'm generally less than pleased to have it helped along on a daily basis because I don't have enough money to seek proper medical attention. For fuck's sake, a decent *mattress* can be considered a contributor to an optimal health outcome.

But poor people wake up knowing that today, no matter how physically shitty we may feel, we can't call in sick or slack off at our desk surfing the Internet. We have to go to our crappy jobs no matter what. We will feel guilty about the bills and the dishes and we will firmly put them out of our mind as we march out the door in our polyester uniform shirts. Or worse, we will have to find something to do with our endless unemployed hours.

Sometimes, that's all the day is, just another gray nothing. Other times, it's already a bad day and people just have to fucking push me. I've got a bit of a temper, and I have trouble holding my tongue when I'm pretty sure someone's being an asshole. My record from waking up to losing it is in the neighborhood of an hour. Mostly I make it through a whole day, but sometimes it's just not in the cards. The night before my record-setting morning, I'd made it home from work at ten p.m. and passed out by eleven. I'd been working extra and was short on sleep to begin with. My boss called at five a.m. wanting me to come in. I drank some coffee and dragged my sorry ass out the door, and when I showed up,



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he was mad that it had taken me half an hour to come in. He'd been under the impression that when I said, "I'll be there," I meant that I'd use my teleportation device instead of the beater car I had at the time. I blew it off, figuring that he was just in a bad mood. But he simply couldn't let it go—every time someone complained about this or that setup not being done properly, he said that if only I'd been there on time we'd have made it.

I lost it. Completely. This is the version of what I said that I can best remember through my blistering rage: "If you think I'm so goddamned terrible, why did you call me in? Did you not realize that I'd be on a fourteen-hour shift and that I was running on a few miserable fucking hours of sleep? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU INCOMPETENT FUCKING ASSHOLE?" And I said all this in my outdoor voice. In front of customers. I spent the afternoon looking for work, as I was newly unemployed.

Being poor is something like always being followed around by violins making "tense" movie music. You know that commercial where the band Survivor follows a guy around playing "Eye of the Tiger"? Yeah, it's like that, but the musicians are invisible and they're playing the shower scene from *Psycho*. Nobody likes being harried, but for a lot of us it starts upon waking and doesn't let up until we crash at night. Eventually, you just know that something bad is going to happen. That's not paranoia or pessimism; it's reality.

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When my story went viral, I got a lot of blowback from people demanding to know how I dared to have children while I was living in a weekly motel. Well, I'll tell you: That's not how we started out the pregnancy. The VA didn't end up paying us the living stipend that we'd expected so we'd gotten a cheap apartment. That was fine, for the short term. Until one day, when I was heavily pregnant, a summer storm flooded our apartment and destroyed everything we owned.

The landlord hadn't paid for proper maintenance on the storm drains, and they backed up. We didn't have family in the area, so we went to stay at the motel while we sorted out the damage. We'd been in touch with maintenance, who'd assured us that they'd take care of the water.

What we hadn't realized was that the landlord's version of "taking care of it" was having the guys run a Shop-Vac for a while and then set up some box fans. This was to take care of a flood that was feet deep. The water soaked into the concrete walls so thoroughly that when we stopped in a few days later, you could see the mold growing to above your head.

We didn't have enough money to pay for both the motel and our rent. We called the landlord to get a new apartment, maybe one that wasn't toxic, and were told that the apartment was fine now that it was dry. We called the health department and the press, neither of whom cared much. The health department guy, in all fairness, happened to not

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be in charge of this particular issue and couldn't tell me who was. But he agreed that we definitely shouldn't live there, especially not with a baby.

The result? The landlord sued for eviction because we weren't paying the rent on our flooded apartment. Cue the movie violins. Something as simple as a summer storm can mean disaster. So I learned to simply expect that if things felt like they were going rather too well, something would come along to knock me back into reality.

Gruff attitudes are rife among people with low-wage jobs. And it's no wonder, really, considering the lives we lead. Yet many of our employers actually seem to think it's reasonable to require unfeigned good cheer in their employees, and this I don't get. It doesn't make sense to hire people at wages that guarantee they'll be desperate and then be disappointed when they're not always capable of pretending otherwise. Look, I don't like walking into a gas station or fast-food joint or box store and dealing with a bunch of sullen idiots either. But people don't seem to stop to wonder why we're uniformly so pissed off and unhelpful. I think you'll find that the happier employees are in general, the happier they are at work. It isn't rocket science. My guess is that, like me, a huge number of poor people are depressed. Anger is one of the few emotions that can penetrate depression. It's strong enough to punch through the haze, so a whole lot of people like me hold on to our anger. We cherish

it. The alternative, at least for me, is a sort of dreary nothing. Anger and depression make for a cute couple, right?

Regardless of our mood, we're never fully checked into work because our brains are taken up with at least one and sometimes all of the following: 1) calculating how much we will make if we stay an extra hour, 2) worrying we'll be sent home early because it's slow and theorizing how much we will therefore lose, 3) placing bets on whether we will be allowed to leave in time to make it to our other job or pick up our kids. Meanwhile, we spend massive amounts of energy holding down the urge to punch something after the last customer called us an idiot. People don't have any compunction about insulting service workers, but it's amazing how quickly they'll complain about your attitude if you're not sufficiently good-natured about it.

Our jobs are as much emotional labor as they are physical. What they are not, what they are never allowed to be, is mentally engaging. So we're trying to zombie out to survive. We're not allowed to deviate from policy even if the policy is kind of stupid and counterproductive. Nobody is interested in our thoughts, opinions, or the contributions we might be able to make—they want robots.

Our survival mechanisms are the things that annoy the

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customers most. Next time you see someone being "sullen" or "rude," try being nice to them. It's likely you'll be the first person to do so in hours. Alternatively, ask them an intelligent question. I used to come alive when someone legitimately wanted to know what I'd recommend. I knew everything about my products, having stared at all the boxes while I restocked them, but people rarely wanted me to tell them about anything more than the price.

What's guaranteed to be counterproductive for you is demanding better service with a superior attitude. We'll perform better service. But we'll be sure to hand you the shirt that we know is stained, or the meat that's within the technical limit of servable but will probably taste less than optimal. And we'll do it with a shit-eating grin on our face and well-wishes on our lips, just like you demand but refuse to pay a single extra penny for.

If you want us to be happy to serve you, make it worth our while and be pleasant. Next time you're in a low-wage place, try walking up to an employee and saying, "I'm sorry to disturb you, I know you have work, but could you tell me where this thing I need is?" I guarantee you, *that* is how you get service from a demoralized staff. Respect their workload. There is no low-wage employer in the world that doesn't expect a ton of chores finished in a shift besides customer service. Don't just expect that millions of people are by nature pleased to grovel at the feet of your twenty dollars.

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Humans in general aren't built that way, and Americans in particular. We're supposed to have a stubborn streak of pride, remember?

In Cincinnati, I lived just under two miles from the closest grocery store that carried the sort of formula my daughter could tolerate. She was insanely colicky, so I used to spend my free time walking her around the city, letting the vibration of the stroller lull her into farting an incredible amount before she finally, blessedly, fell asleep. I went to the store most days, buying only what we absolutely needed, because I couldn't fit much more in the stroller. I still love to wander, because if nobody knows where I am, then nobody can ask me for anything or call me about an unpaid bill. And I get angry out of all proportion when someone disturbs my peace, because it is so rare that I actually feel light and free.

I don't get much of my own time, and I am vicious about protecting it. For the most part, I am paid to pretend that I am inhuman, paid to cater to both the reasonable and unreasonable demands of the general public. So when I'm off work, please feel free to go fuck yourself. The times that I am off work, awake, and not taking care of life's details are few and far between. It's the only time I have any autonomy. I do not choose to waste that precious time worrying about

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how you feel. Worrying about you is something they pay me for; I don't work for free. You don't get to demand this ten minutes from me too. This is mine, and my family's.

I actually don't mind, on feminist grounds, when men tell me to smile. I can see why women would, but I've worked in bars and I've worked in strip clubs and I've learned that you can commodify anything, including sex and pretend love and faked respect and false empathy. "Smile," coming from a man, is just the opening chatter to me at this point. It is a sign that this particular man has nothing original to say and is probably kind of a dick.

I do mind the smile-on-command directive on class grounds. Listen here, buster. It's not my fucking job to decorate your world, not unless you're willing to make it so. Sure, I'll smile. That'll be five bucks.

I feel bad about my reactions sometimes, because I can't always stop them even when they're directed at someone who's having the same sort of day as I am. I was once at a store and could not for the life of me find the fucking diapers. I wandered the length and breadth of the place—nothing. I was exhausted, completely finished. Some poor woman who worked there stepped into my field of vision. I meant to ask where the diapers were stocked like a normal human being. What came out instead was "Why did you people hide the fucking diapers?" I couldn't tell you how that made it from brain to mouth. It just happens some-

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times. So when I am on the receiving end of customers' misery, I'm never sure whether to actually be mad at the customers. Maybe they tried to be polite and just didn't have the energy, because when they were at work, someone else came in, and so on, and so on, and so on.

Maybe it's because, as I mentioned earlier, I spend a lot of the time depressed. Always have, always will. Give me medicine, I get less upset about being depressed, but the fact of it never leaves. Sometimes I am clinically, trouble-getting-out-of-bed depressed. Other times, I am just low-level, drag-myself-through-my-day depressed. Some people might call me pessimistic because I always expect disaster to occur. But looking at my life, I think that's bull. When I expect doom? That's what I call reality.

Mostly, I ignore the depression. I developed a caustic sense of humor. I discovered mosh pits to vent. I listen to seriously angry music. When that doesn't work, I soothe the emptiness with terrible food and old jazz. If that doesn't work and I can afford it, I go in and see someone about getting some medicine for a few weeks. That means making appointments any place I think I might be able to get in, assuming that I'll be turned down for service, and showing up to them all until I find someone who's willing to do me a solid and give me a week or two of anti-anxiety medicine. If I can't find anyone to do that, I just sort of check out for a while.



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Those times, I can't get past the part of the day where you're supposed to put on pants. I'll stare at the pants. I will tell myself to put on the pants. I will get stern with myself about them. And then I'll lose a few hours to a discussion with myself about how much I actually really do deserve all the punishments I will heap upon me if I do not put on the pants. When I zone back in again, the sun will be down and it will blessedly be time for bed again.

Sometimes I can convince my boss that I have a terrible flu. Sometimes I just don't show up, and those times it's half and half whether I've got a job to go back to; it depends on how understaffed they are. Sometimes I haven't been employed in the first place.

Not all poor people are chemically depressed, but a lot of us are situationally depressed at any given time. And that's because our lives are depressing. I realize that might at first sound simplistic, but I don't think it's a lot more complicated than that.

When I think of myself and all the poor people I know, there is only one person who I would have called irrepressibly sunny. Her name was Melissa, and she seemed indefatigable. Nothing, and I mean not eviction, not being without electricity, not being called names—nothing brought this woman down. She once told me that even when she felt terrible, she liked being a bright spot. I'd known her for six months when her kid got in trouble and the school intimated

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that it was because she wasn't doing enough for him. And that's what finally broke her. She got into a terrible funk, withdrawn and silent unless you forced something out of her. She started noticing all the things that were wrong in her world, and that was the end. She was one of us.

That's the worst, watching someone lose hope. I'm not swelled with it personally, but I always like to see people who aren't only pretending to be in a good mood, people who are truly optimistic about life. Those people are contagious, even to a curmudgeon like me. It's heart-wrenching to watch that fade, like watching a star die or something. I can't think of anything poetic and tragic enough to describe it.

I recognize that the attitude that I fall into—hell, that I cultivate—as a ward against the instability of being poor isn't always helpful to me. But it's not as if I can just go in and out of it, like putting on or taking off my makeup. The attitude I carry as a poor person is my armor, and after so many years of fighting and clawing and protecting myself and my family from impending disaster, that armor has become a permanent part of me.

Take a walk through any impoverished neighborhood. You will hear the word "pussy" a lot. A lot. It's just how some people talk. "Suck my dick," a man will say jauntily to his

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friends. Or angrily to his friends. Or randomly to women passing on the street. "Fucking pussy" is a popular phrase too, as in "you're a" or "I need some." Street cant isn't something that poor Americans came up with magically a year after the Pilgrims got here. It's a product of environments in which everyone's always posturing just a bit, just in case. A lot of times it means absolutely nothing.

But there is always the potential that as you are walking down the street, some sort of altercation will erupt within feet of you. Maybe someone is angry with a cashier because their card was declined, and they start yelling about disrespect and ass-kicking and what they ought to do. Maybe a homeless person will loudly and suddenly commence complaining about whatever it is that is bothering them that day. Maybe a mercurial couple will have a disagreement in their own attention-seeking fashion.

I was sitting in a Denny's recently, drinking coffee and trying to finish writing a chapter of this book. The table next to me had a few kids, two men and a woman, all under twenty. And the table behind me had two people in it, one of whom took it into his head that he'd been insulted by Table 1 somehow. Next thing you know, everyone's out of their seats throwing insults back and forth, tossing gauntlet after gauntlet, trying to goad a fight. I wound up taking the aggressive dude outside to smoke while we waited for his friend to grab their food and leave. Someone else talked

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down the people who really had been confronted for zero reason.

That was a random Tuesday. I've been to the same Denny's more than once, and I expect to just drink my coffee. But you never know when you're going to be talking down an idiot. It doesn't happen all the time, and it's not like most trips to the store aren't rather boring and mundane. It's just that it *could* happen at any time in the environments where everyone is always tense and worried and stressed. It *does* happen with some frequency. And it's best to be prepared for the eventuality.

Being poor in the country requires a toughness. We have to be capable of changing our own damned tires and putting shims on a starter. We chop wood and catch or grow food. Country poor is not even going to the thrift store, because it's miles away. It's getting up and dealing with the animals and the crops (if you have them) before you go to work. It's expecting at any moment to break down at the side of the road because your truck is so old it doesn't have a computer in it anywhere. And there's no public transportation in the country. If you don't have a working car, you're hoofing it. Rain or snow.

So yeah, out of necessity poor people walk around being just a bit rough and tumble, a bit sharp-edged. We proudly declare that we are rednecks, we wear boots and have weap-

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ons with which to defend ourselves and we are doing well enough on our own, thank you. Or we scream that we are from streets somewhere, that we will take no shit, that our neighborhood doesn't have a place for weakness in it and it makes us hard like warriors.

It also makes me say "fuck." A lot. It's my vernacular as a matter of habit, and I developed it as a defense mechanism. Saying "fuck," especially as a woman, is the quickest and easiest way to assert that you aren't to be fucked with, or at least that you're pretending well enough. It's a tough word, a vulgar word, something you don't say comfortably if you're scared of public disapprobation or muggers.

That's the upside of it for me. The downside is that it doesn't go over well when it slips into situations where it's inappropriate and it might even come across as threatening. I know this affects how I'm treated when I engage with the upper classes, but it's a habit that's practically subconscious.

I walk with a tiny swagger. Many people who have lived in the not-so-nice parts of cities do this to varying degrees because it tells people from a distance that we know how to handle ourselves, and that we are streetwise enough to make a challenging target. It's also unconscious in me at this point. To middle- and upper-class people, it's one more thing that sets me apart, that sends the unintended signal that I don't belong in nicer company.

My tough demeanor was at first something I cultivated as a survival mechanism. But after a while it became more natural. It's a lot like hiding my teeth—I got so good at it that I didn't notice after a while. I stopped noticing anything, stopped registering things as inappropriate or odd. And I stopped noticing when I was being inappropriate or odd, to the extent that I ever knew.

Looking back, I can see where the crossing of the ways happened. I started to lose contact with the middle class at the same time that I became comfortable in the lower one. You can bridge both worlds, but only if you're consciously doing it and you're not too tired. Otherwise you revert. I'm perfectly capable of holding an intellectually stimulating discussion like a human being. But my friends will tell you that they can tell how tired I am by how frequently I replace polite words and phrases with profane or aggressive ones.

And I don't just have problems with playing the part of someone who gives a shit about the niceties; I have difficulty looking the part. That costs money.

I'm not going to claim that I had sterling self-esteem before I started seeing my economic status written all over my unmoisturized face. I was an awkward, overweight kid who liked books and chess. I was a nerd who missed the makeup and fashion years. But being poor sucked right out of me what little self-regard I might have had. Rich people complain when they have bad hair days or fat days. I have "fryer

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grease in my hair” days, and “not a single article of clothing makes me look like anything but shit” days. I’m not even going to bother explaining how bad teeth and bad skin might also get you pegged as less valuable, less worthy of respect. You’re reading a book voluntarily, you’re smart enough to figure it out. But those are only the *big* visible markers. There are a whole lot of small ones. If the average rich person had to walk around for a day wearing a polyester work uniform, they’d need Xanax.

Poverty, or poor, or working class—whatever level of not enough you’re at—you feel it in a million tiny ways. Sometimes it’s the condescension, sometimes it’s that you’re itchy. I don’t think people who have never been poor quite understand that.

I like to use jeans as an example. I just bought my first decent pair, the exorbitant \$70 kind. It’s like some kind of fucking miracle. I didn’t know denim wasn’t supposed to be uncomfortable. And I’d heard about jeans making your butt look amazing, but I’d never believed it. The kind you can buy at Walmart come in two styles: mom jeans and low-cut skinny jeans meant for middle schoolers because no grown woman could get into them. Regardless of style, they are heavy, the fabric is the rugged we-mine-coal thickness, and once they stretch across your unfortunate lower abdomen, you’re fucked. They’ll hide the curves you like and prominently display the ones you’d rather nobody noticed.

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Assuming, of course, that they fit at all. I have one favorite pair of jeans, which I've had for so long that they've gone soft from washing. I've worn them when I was a size 12 and when I was a size 16. If I wash them in really hot water and then throw them in a hot dryer, they'll shrink enough that I can belt them to stay up when I'm skinny. And if I wash them in cold and stretch the waistband while they're drying, they'll expand enough that I can zip them when I'm on the top side of my usual range of sizes. So yeah, when I put them on, I am wearing pants, but they're the kind that make you look weirder than you would just leaving the house without any pants on in the first place. At least if you're pantsless you're given the room to be crazy. Bad pants just mean bad taste for most people.

I'd never had occasion to walk into a makeup store until recently, when I was going on camera and desperately needed something for my face. I figured that if I went to a special makeup place, they could help me choose foundation and maybe lipstick, because I never know what color to get. The salesperson not only helped me with that, but she also hooked me up with free makeup application lessons, and gave me more free shit than I could have imagined. Samples of this, samples of that, here try this face cream. Just because I walked in with twenty bucks. It's insane, the perks you get at specialty stores.

I've heard my whole life that I should spend wisely, invest



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in my appearance, that it will make people take me more seriously. Buy a few key pieces, the style authorities say, which would be great if I could ever scrape together \$300 of disposable income to spend on a suit. A \$20 bottle of makeup, okay, I can do that every now and then. I've got \$50 sometimes, but it's still not enough to buy a suit with. If I could put away \$20 a week in a little piggy bank marked "nice suit for Linda," then I'd have enough to buy it about fifteen weeks from now. And who am I kidding? By the time I have \$40 saved, I can think of ten other things that \$40 could be spent on. Stuff like milk and toilet paper. How often am I really going to wear a suit, and how important might that suit be the one time I need it?

More than once I've shown up to a professional event wearing something entirely inappropriate. I've gone too casual to formal events, and I've gone the other way too. I'll show up to a casual event in heels. I don't have the time or resources for style handbooks and fashion magazines, and I don't get the social cues and niceties. And even if I did get them, I couldn't afford them.

Let me clarify: I'm not saying that all poor people don't know how to dress. There are certainly those among us who do better than others in this area (we have our share of aspiring fashion designers who watch *Project Runway* and all those makeover shows, and you can learn to put on any kind of eye shadow in the world on YouTube). But even if I

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knew what to wear, I couldn't afford it. I once wore a suit two sizes too small because I'd gained some weight and didn't have anything else that fit. It didn't occur to me until hours into the thing that the only people speaking seriously with me were men looking for company that evening. What I actually had to say was never heard. Then there was the black-tie event to which I wore a light summer dress. Of course I knew it was the wrong season for it, but it was the nicest thing I had. I wasn't taken particularly seriously at that event either.

So, if first impressions are as important as everyone says they are, what do you think my chances are of getting a professional job if I'm competing against someone who dresses the part? I guarantee you that even if that other job candidate is a little less qualified than me, the boss is going to feel more comfortable hiring the person who she's not afraid will stick out like a (poor) sore thumb at the weekly meeting with the CEO.

I didn't really realize that I was fully lower class in both sensibilities and presentation until I found myself at what was the last of my professional social engagements. I was attempting to resurrect something like a career during the worst part of our stay in Ohio, when we weren't getting our GI Bill stipend, and I thought maybe I could scrape something up. I was invited out to dinner by a bunch of old political work colleagues, and I found myself with nothing to

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say. I had no insights on the new restaurants or movies or bars, nothing that you typically reach for to make conversation. Every single addition I could have made would have been inappropriate: I couldn't have talked about my neighbor getting in a fight with his truck while he was drunk because it wouldn't start and he thought punching it might help. (His roommate had disabled the thing. Friends don't let friends drink and drive, and smart friends let friends punch the truck instead of them.) I couldn't talk about which food banks were best for produce and which for diapers. I also didn't order any food or drinks, which was pointed out repeatedly by the waiter. ("Are you *sure* you won't be ordering? Can I tempt you with this/that/the other?") I finally had to leave the table, track him down, explain that I couldn't afford anything on the menu, and ask could he *please* stop making a huge deal out of it? And after that, I never called any of those colleagues again. Nor did they call me.

I understand why that happened. But what I don't understand is why people who walk into a fast-food restaurant often seem to think I should put on the same smile and elegant demeanor they could expect at Saks or the bank where they put their money. I think the sorts of people who honestly think that service workers should be more smiley and gracious just don't get it. They don't get it because they can take so much for granted in their own lives—things like respect, consideration, and basic fairness on the job.

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Benefits. Insurance. They're used to the luxury of choosing the most aesthetically pleasing item on the shelf, of caring what color their car is rather than simply whether it runs or not. They don't understand how depressing it is to be barely managing your life at any given moment of the day. So forgive me if I don't tell you to have a pleasant day with unfeigned enthusiasm when I hand you your fucking hamburger. You'll have to settle for the fake sort.

In my world, we don't have the time or the energy to bullshit about our feelings or worry about anyone else's. When I've found myself in professional situations, I'm driven nearly to distraction by how much fucking effort is wasted making sure we all feel nice and fuzzy and comfortable. I don't get that; it's not part of work to me. And it keeps me from getting ahead. If someone asks me my opinion on something, I simply give it. I don't bother spending five minutes talking about the weather and how lovely your shirt is first. I am thinking about the question I was asked. I figure nobody's getting paid to win the office nice competition. And it's amazing to me that some of the same people who can walk by a homeless person without even blinking are obsessed with what everyone thinks of them at work. Meanwhile I know that if I wasted half as much time in my service jobs talking about my feelings as I have in my professional life, I'd be out of work and lying right next to that homeless guy my white-collar friends just skirted past.

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Maybe feelings are something that only professional people are allowed to have. My friends and I know that no one gives a shit about ours. We're constantly told to know our place and not make a fuss about the insane conditions we're expected to deal with, both at home and at work. And yeah, this discussion about attitude is coming back to the subject of work a lot, because guess what? It's what we spend a huge percentage of our lives on. And how we're treated there isn't something we can just shake off when we leave. It becomes a part of us, just like that armor we wear.

But still we're told to keep smiling, and to be grateful for the chance to barely survive while being blamed for not succeeding. Whether or not that's actually true isn't even relevant; that's what it feels like. Unwinnable. Sisyphean.

Responsible poverty is an endless cycle of no. No, you can't have that. You can't do that, can't afford that, can't eat that, can't choose that. This is off-limits, and that is not for you, and this over here is meant for different kinds of people. More than once I've spent money I couldn't really afford simply to state that I *could*, if only to myself. Just to say it.

To be told that you deserve nothing more than that, are entitled to nothing more, is enraging. If poverty is supposed to be like prison, then why don't we kill two birds with one stone and put prisoners in all the low-wage jobs? All the private prisons would be wildly profitable, and the poor

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people would deserve their poverty because it would be their punishment.

Sure, we can beat the odds. Sometimes we can climb out of it. You're reading this book by a service worker, after all. But the irony of my success here is that I didn't get this chance because I worked my balls off for some asshole who thought me ungrateful for my sub-living wage. You're reading this book by me because lightning struck, because my story went viral. And by definition, that can't happen for everyone. You can hope for your one real shot, but you sure as hell don't plan for it. It hurts too much to plan and plan again and keep waiting for the magic day.

So that's been my American dream. And it's reality for millions of us, the people who are looking grumpy behind the counter. Our bodies hurt, our brains hurt, and our souls hurt. There's rarely anything to smile about.

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I've Got Way  
Bigger Problems  
Than a Spinach  
Salad Can Solve

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