

The bastard enjoys popping up at my place and commenting on the 'shiteosity' of my studio apartment.

"Do something man, hang pictures or some shit," laughed Orless, a grinning, light-skinned bastard who made you hate him like 60-year-old men hated colonoscopies.

He was one of those friends who just won't expire – like cease to be in your life. Yet he remains, dispensing painful truths that smash your brittle self-esteem to bits.

"Man, you got two degrees more than me man. How come my place looks better than yours?"

My apartment is a bomb shelter. Fast food paper bags litter the corner by my computer. Spit cups of discarded cigar carcasses sit on every windowsill. Ash from incense sticks heap on the floors by my closet doors. Music discs and books scatter about my living room. Clothes are everywhere: my boxer briefs, nose blowing dress socks, and my masturbation T-shirts – with no hamper to dispense them. My kitchen sink is always filled with dishes and gray water. And now I have an infestation of fruit flies that hover over every fucking thing. And those little demons have found a way to seep into my microwave. I can't leave leftovers in there anymore.

I wonder what my parents would think. By the time they were my age, they had me, a mortgage, and a diverse stock portfolio. After 36-years, I got two degrees, a Corolla, and student loans the equivalent of Gary, Indiana's contribution to its state's Gross Domestic Product. I live on a salary that affords me access to the choicest offerings on the McDonald's Dollar Menu. My money goes to my fruitless weekends. And when I have sex – which isn't often – the fear of shattering my bachelorhood reigns as more of a concern than whether I would be a good father. I feel ashamed and angry. I felt like my parents have lied to me.

In my generation, Black parents told their children that a college degree would mean a life of mobility, if not the upward kind, then the one that would eventually curve up. They sold us on the belief that a degree, even the paper that it

was printed on, was some secret scroll that would make us immune to poverty. I mean, I get where they're coming from, a degree is a powerful symbol. The mainstream will like you more. Economic opportunities will abound. Now, shit should be cake, America elected a black president.

And since Obama won the presidency, I've noticed white people smiling at me more. Sidenote: The day after he got the presidential nomination, I walked a few blocks to my favorite Hyde Park breakfast spot to get turkey sausage links and two over easy eggs. A cute, silver-haired, elderly white lady stopped by my table to congratulate me for Obama's victory. I was stunned. In my mind I was like, *what the fuck does Obama's victory have to do with me? I still have a negative balance in my checking account. And the only reason I'm having this eight dollar breakfast is because I was able to sell enough CD's to get back \$42 – enough to live off of until my next skinny paycheck. Like Barack Obama becoming the 44th President is gonna bump up my socioeconomic standing.* But I knew it took a lot for her to come over and even address me. So, I smiled and told her, “thank you.”

After breakfast, I trekked back up through 57th Street to my ‘shit-eous’ apartment, only to see a young University of Chicago co-ed, grab her purse at my approach and break across the street. I was more tickled by the irony than perturbed, that in the home seat of the first black president of the United States, a supposed bastion of intellectualism and white liberalism, I'm still treated like a nigger – even the day after he wins the U.S. Presidency.

So the point to my thesis is this: with a college degree or not, I'm still a pariah, just a more articulate one.

Of course, when speaking to a room full of “at-risk” black and Latino kids, who will probably get shot before they reach 17, who get fed this idea that college is their salvation, you have to lie. Don't tell them that you can get fucked on the other side, that, instead of the instant death they tend to suffer, the one I am experiencing is a slow, check-to-check, lower middle class one – the most painful way to die, by far.

I wore my best suit to speak to a group of 7th grade boys at an elementary school on the Westside of Chicago, a labyrinth of frozen corners that are drenched daily with fresh coats of blood every night. I was trying to read from Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, but there they were playing and carrying on, chucking spitballs

at each other and rapping T.I. verses a cappella. We were all seated in a circle. My seat was positioned at the 12 o'clock position. The teacher's desk was off to the side by the side of windows that lined the east wall of the classroom. They were cracked at the bottom so that the wheezing air bled into the room. Faded illustrations of obligatory civil rights heroes lined the classroom's west wall: Frederick Douglass, Harriett Tubman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Interspersed with those, were newer, bigger poster shots of contemporary Black celebs like Michael Jordan, Halle Berry, and Usher.

They didn't give a damn about what I had to say, even while reading from one of the most seminal pieces of African American literature. It didn't matter. One kid, his name was Phillip, seemed to be the leader of the group, holding court with two other boys on the left side of the circle. The teacher stood by his desk. Mr. Cox was his name. By the way he dressed it seemed that Cox hadn't felt a woman's touch in a long time. This was something I could identify in myself and see in other men. He seemed like a lonely middle-aged man whose weekends were dominated by grocery store trips, swills of off-brand whiskey, Golf Channel viewings and Internet porn wackings. His shirt and trousers looked like they were at war.

His horn-rimmed glasses couldn't mask the sneer on his face, either. One couldn't help but think that part of his contempt stemmed from his racism, whether inherent or acquired. Or that perhaps, his compassion for those kids had shriveled up, at the first, second or seventeenth time those rowdy boys disrespected him. I hated and pitied him at the same time.

"Reading is important because when you get to college, you have to know how to read and write. When you get out in the real world, you need reading and writing skills to survive."

"Nah my dude, you need a pistol!" Phillip spat out.

The whole class busted out laughing. The teacher finally stepped up.

"What Mister Rasmussen is saying is highly important. You need to read and write. How else are you going to fill out a job application or take tests or order meals? These skills are crucial."

Phillip raised his hand. "Mr. Cox, if we become good readers and writers, can we get a job like yours?"

“Of course, Phillip, you can have job like mine. When you read and write and go to college.”

Cox then plopped down in his seat, now wearing the thinnest smile ever. He seemed like a smug bastard, the kind who promotes even his smallest accomplishments, hoping that it would eclipse his biggest fuck ups.

Phillip raised his hand again.

“Yes, Phillip,” he said.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” The whole class was focused was on this exchange, not me, the guest speaker.

“Phillip, that’s none of your business.”

“So you get no pussy and no business?”

The whole class of boys fell out laughing like they were grown men who’ve experienced a lifetime of sex. The laughs drowned out Cox’s calls for order and obedience.

“You all are an embarrassment,” he shouted at them once the hilarity died down.

Phillip and another boy shouted back at the teacher.

“You an embarrassment! A 45-year-old man who can’t get no pussy!”

Again, the class erupted in laughter. I snickered at how quick those boys were. Actually, I was clutching my sides. The class started laughing at the fact that I was laughing. The look Mr. Cox flashed me was priceless. His face spasmed like Popeye’s, seconds after he had his spinach. I mean dude looked like he really wanted to kick my ass. Instead, he fixed his gaze back onto the class.

“Silence,” he barked at the class.

“Mr. Rasmussen, would you explain to the class what you do and how much you make.” Me being a co-conspirator in their rebellion seemed to instantly heighten my stature with the class. I became uncomfortable.

“Yeah man, how much money should I expect with all that education,” a boy yelled from the back of the class.

“Yeah, what’s your bank accounts lookin’ like, Mr. Ras!” Phillip chuckled. “Do you make one hundred thousand dollars? ‘Cause, my uncle said that a man ain’t rich until he make one hundred thousand dollars. So with all that education, is you rich?”

Mr. Cox's fake smile reemerged.

"That is just ridiculous."

"Mr. Cox, shut thee fuck up! Let the man answer the question."

Phillip's voice boomed with the kind of authority the teacher wish he had. The sneer, the smile, it all disappeared from Cox's face. His mouth had parted, but his face was expressionless for 30 seconds. The poor man looked as powerless as a mother mediating a fight between her child and her lover.

Cox's voice boomed. The seasoned ear could detect the cracks in the recesses of his throat, however. Still, the man tried.

"One more outburst like that," he said, eyes beginning to bulge from behind his bi-focals.

"Whatever," Phillip spat back in his face.

Cox ignored him.

"Mr. Rasmussen, as you were."

I hated the question that kid gave. Now, I had the class's attention. They really wanted to know whether going through all that schooling would really amount to tangible results. And I didn't blame them at all. There are a lot of people with Master's degrees I hear of who work at Kinko's or manage a T.G.I. Fridays – jobs that didn't match their qualifications.

"I am not rich. I don't make \$100,000."

If defeat had a murmur, it was the one that emanated from my gut, or the 99 cent pastry and the 20-ounce *Dr. Pepper* I just consumed in the car ride on the way over to this assignment.

"I knew that, just tryna' see if you was lying," Phillip said.

My answer seemed to set off some kind of kinetic reaction around the class. Murmurs broke out. A fluorescent light beam twitched. Those boys sat behind their tan desktops like judges behind a bench. Their dismissive eyes, glinted with incredulity, were cast in my direction. They seemed to feel sorry for me.

"Are you poor?" another boy asked.

I thought about the question for four seconds. That classroom visit was supposed to be a time of guidance and instruction, not a cathartic release. I was at least supposed to touch the heart of one kid (at the very least), perhaps altering the view of the reality he occupied while providing a glimpse into what life could be like

for a Chicago black man past the age of 19. But when I thought about my living conditions, the vices, the losses, the loneliness, the horniness, the desperation I experienced, I couldn't lie convincingly. I tried to force a smile but my body betrayed me. The corners of my mouth could not turn up all the way. I wasn't in love with my life and those kids smelled it on me the millisecond I walked up in there. They quieted down to hear my answer.

"Yes, I am poor and I am not the best example of success that you guys need to-"

"Mister Rassmussen," Cox interjected.

"I'm speaking right now, Cox." The kids broke up in laughter over what I said. But the moment missed me. I needed to vomit.

"You kids can't learn anything from me. I get drunk every night off of rum and coke or Vodka and strawberry soda. I watch movies on my computer and cry at the scenes that remind me of the times with the old girlfriends who didn't appreciate me and-"

Mr. Cox jumped up out of his chair, the quickest I'd ever seen a 40-something year old man move.

He got up in my face. The class became frenzied. I could see the heads of nosy students and instructors peeking through the front door of the class.

"Mister Rasmussen, I think you should leave." His breath smelled like hot and sour soup. The hairs in my nose danced.

"I'm just telling them the truth."

"You're not here for that!"

He put a hand to my back as if he were escorting me out of class.

"Get your fucking hands off me!"

Cox jumped back.

"Ooooooooooooooooooh!" The boys seemed to say in unison.

That sentence bellowed from the deepest part of my being, like a good bowel movement.

"You tell that cock he a asshole!" Phillip shouted to the delight of the class, taking them to a higher level of laughter.

"Hahahahaha!" I couldn't hide my laughter at the kid's remark – absolutely brilliant.

“Phillip, get your ass to the principal’s office now!” Mr. Cox brought his own fire. I gathered my book and bag and walked out of that class with Phillip.

When we walked down that hallway, we did so slowly. I admired Phillip, but I was more concerned with what my tomorrow may look like. I wasn’t so sure about his. He was probably going to be suspended or expelled. And I was definitely being kicked out of the Urban Waterfalls Literacy Project. We knew we probably weren’t going to see each other again. We didn’t say anything to each other, except “bye.”

I felt guilty later about what might have happened to him. I tried to say a prayer for him, but I could not finish. My prayers never work.
