

## **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Janitor**

by **Joseph S. Pete**

I've burned human feces on remote outposts, I've dropped bombs down mortar tubes, and I've rushed out to inner-city murder scenes late at night. I've been told by stern-faced cops I needed to "get the hell out of here now" or I'd be arrested. I've been singed by the pulsing heat radiating off a 1,600-degree Fahrenheit steel slab in a hot strip mill; burning fiercely like an indoor sun, the steel's heat was enough to make me stagger back. I've live-broadcasted vacant house fires where billowing, black smoke choked the whole block. I've been followed by police cruisers as an intimidation tactic after reporting on city council meetings. I've been shot at and cursed at. Readers have left me rambling, profanity-laced voicemails; prisoners have sent me long, discursive letters in chicken scratch handwriting.

One could say I've had some interesting jobs.

Careercast.net, an upstart job search website looking to boost its profile through what public relations pros call "earned media" and what really amounts to Hail Mary press releases, puts out an annual list of the worst jobs. It's based on criteria like stress, injury rate, job security, career prospects, and the like. Every year, without fail, the worst three jobs are almost always journalist, military personnel, and lumberjack.

I've been a reporter whose work has taken him to the docks, the halls of Congress, and the supersonic boom-punctured, beer-soaked bacchanalia of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on the much-hyped race day. I've been a soldier who was deployed to the unforgiving furnace of Iraq where many teenage recruits died far too young. I'm not sure journalism is actually worse than soldiering, but the claim sure got them a lot of free media coverage. Over the years, I've always joked I need to work as a lumberjack to complete the trifecta of worst possible jobs.

Currently, I work as a journalist, and I'm hardly "the media elite." I cover heavy industry in one of the sootiest, heavily industrialized places on earth, where a smoky

orange-red haze long hung over the lakeshore and even sludge worms couldn't survive because of all the toxins dumped in the Calumet River. Though good-paying steel mill jobs have been oxidizing away here in the Rust Belt, I still visit factories and refineries often enough that I keep a hard hat, plastic eye protection, and an orange safety vest in the trunk of my decade-old Honda Civic. As recently as the 1980s, driving a foreign-made car could get you a beating or your car windows smashed out here in steel country, but that was before pretty much all the major foreign automakers have since opened factories in the United States and started buying American-made steel. Now there are billboards right by the steel mills for BMW dealerships proudly declaring the German car is made in America. Twenty years ago, such a billboard would have been the target of arson, with a gas can left right by the pole in order to taunt the investigators. Now no one glances twice at such an ad. Values change. Customs evolve. Steelworkers don't hide baseball bats behind signs on the picket lines anymore. Some behaviors, like slashing the tires of scabs, have become less tolerated. People mellow or lose their fighting spirit.

Life grinds you down. My father repeatedly told me to do what I loved for a living because I'd have to do it for eight hours a day, for a full third of my fleeting life. He was an attorney and later a judge who clearly loathed every minute of it. I thought he was speaking from hard-won experience. I thought he was imparting fatherly wisdom. I thought he was being profound. Only later in life did I learn it was an oft-repeated cliché, one that was quickly nodded off as trite when I was supposedly offering career advice to a younger colleague.

But I've tried to do what I love, writing, despite long odds and a legacy media industry that seems to be terminally contracting and ultimately bound for the silent graveyard of history. The threat of layoffs hovers persistently, something shown in academic studies to be deleterious to one's health. Every year, more beloved colleagues shuffle out the door with their personal effects stuffed hastily in plastic trash bags or cardboard boxes. I've hauled their things to the parking lot and dumped them unceremoniously in their trunks as they wonder what their future holds.

But despite insecurity, low pay, diminished career prospects compared even to a decade ago, a growing reliance on underpaid freelancers, and the general scorn of

society that's been conditioned by politicians to distrust and even hate the media who labor to keep them informed, I feel privileged.

There are worse jobs, completely soulless drags rewarded only by a paycheck. Take my first job as a janitor.

Unlike many of my peers in high school, I wasn't particularly interested in starting work at a fast food restaurant, a Cold Stone Creamery or wherever that would hire an unskilled, untested teen. My classmates were all more social and itching to drive to go visit their boyfriends or girlfriends, to shop at the mall, to venture into the city, or to sustain a social life. I was largely content to spend my weekends walking to the library and then camping out and reading as many books as I could.

But soon I came to appreciate a little pocket money could be beneficial. I could check out a bunch of library books and then buy some bacon, coffee, and eggs over easy at a nearby diner where I could continue reading before heading home to my boring, dreary house. I could even catch an indie film at the arthouse theater by the library or ride a commuter train into the city, where I could visit the Art Institute and wander wonderingly in the great canyons of skyscrapers in downtown Chicago.

So the summer after I entered legal working age, I took a seasonal job as a janitor at the Catholic high school I attended. Summer maintenance meant a deep clean that required not only the motley janitorial staff that worked there year-round but also the cavalry of high schoolers who were pressed into service for a few months.

Though I grew up just outside the murder capital of the United States at the time, I lived a sheltered suburban existence and the job was my first true introduction to grit. Literally. The janitor's shop used industrial-strength soap filled with gritty particles to help clean off stubborn grease and intractable grime. The shop was a dingy, dusty, subterranean place crammed with frayed mops, bulky wet-dry vacuums, and metal shelves stocked with spare light bulbs, paper towels, toilet paper, and sundry other supplies. It was the first place I came across an old-school timecard puncher and those buffed metal mirrors that present you with only a distorted funhouse shadow of a reflection. The coffee maker was always percolating wheezingly toward a sputtering crescendo and the coffee pot was ringed with a stubborn brown stain that could never be removed, no matter how much elbow grease was applied. It was my first glimpse into

the dark underbelly that keeps places like old schools running.

We were dispatched to deep-cleaning tasks such as polishing a thin ring of brass around the hallways of the fifty-year-old private school building, which my father had attended before me. Since there was little supervision, many of my fellow student-workers checked out and killed time during the day by sleeping in empty classrooms. I was meticulous in my duties but easily bored. I polished the brass to a gleaming sheen but with a green bristle pad in one hand and a splayed paperback in the other. I probably inhaled way too much toxic brass cleaner in the process but plowed through many books. It helped that I had a jangling set of keys that granted master access. I could get into the teacher's lounge or library to immediately replace any book I had finished with a new one. At the time, my taste was indiscriminate. I lapped up classics like *Don Quixote* and *A Clockwork Orange* and also plowed through science fiction fare like Arthur C. Clark's *Space Odyssey* trilogy and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, as well as Catholic work I deemed necessary and canonical, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas's tortured writings. And for some ungodly reason, I particularly was drawn to philosophy such as Kierkegaard, Hegel and Nietzsche, the denser and opaquer the better.

As an antisocial loner, I was drawn to books both as a needed alternative source of stimulation and as a version of Linus's blanket. I even read while mowing the vast front lawn, the baseball field where the state champion team played its home games, and the football field that was home to the legendary Battle of Broadway with neighboring Merrillville High School. It's not particularly difficult to push a lawnmower while reading a book. Books in fact rest neatly on the control bar, with one hand pinning down each side and a flick of the thumb to turn the pages. I still plod along on the treadmill with a book in hand and often walk with a book, which a possibly drunk passerby once shouted was impossible even though hunched-over zombies peruse their smartphones literally every second of every day while walking the streets of any major city, college town, and quaint burgh from sea to scrolling sea.

But the straight-and-narrow priest who served as the high school principal despite a lack of academic background believed I could not properly focus on the sacred attention-consuming duty of walking in a straight line while propelling a

lawnmower and reading. He yelled as much at me. I pocketed the book while he glowered, then pulled it back out when he went inside. He later came back to check that I didn't resume reading, as though I were completely untrustworthy. I remember distinctly I was reading Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*, which I was eager to devour after savoring the haunting poetic melancholy of his poignant war memoir *Good-Bye to All That* and which I thought was a historical tome that even an elderly, conservative principal could appreciate.

That was the exact moment when I realized that work was rubbish, that small-minded managers would follow petty rules unthinkingly, and that I was likely in for a lifetime of stifling oppression. That was the moment I realized you subject yourself to penny-ante tyrants to eke out a living, and that you sell not only your time and your toil but also your interiority and any small gesture of self-expression while you're officially on the clock. They didn't want to let you stake anything back for yourself, however tiny and inconsequential, almost as if out of spite. It was the moment when I realized I should try to get paid for something creative and fulfilling, something I wanted to do and could pursue as a craft, even if it meant leaving a lot of money on the table. It was the moment I realized you have to serve yourself first. You either pursued your own dreams or forsook them forever.

My high school alma mater vindicated me, after a fashion, more than a decade later when it announced it would abandon the campus I spent so much time polishing and mowing in favor of the far-flung suburbs, effectively giving up on the inner-city transfers who saw it as a pathway to a better life, and certainly giving up on the neighborhood that gave it purpose in the first place. Half the nearby stores were boarded-up, and the school followed an outward migration to the greener lots of new subdivisions further south. On some level, I knew the moment I was told to put down the book that this was yet another institution that would ultimately fail me. What kind of school tells a kid to put down a book? I've come to learn that all institutions ultimately fail, that the rumbling, unthinking machinery rattles along until belts wear thin, parts snap off, and corrosion wears it all down. In the end, everyone is disposable and everything is ephemeral. The rust always wins.

I'm pursuing my passion as a writer for a daily newspaper now but fear it's only a

matter of time before the rust catches up to me.



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