DIANAH SMITH

Invisible Lives
Vignettes of the working poor

Brother

In a few weeks my brother may be heading to Alberta. Again.

He went out west last spring hoping, like many before him and undoubtedly many after him, to find some measure of security in full-time, well paying, permanent employment. I knew he was struggling even with his three part-time jobs but I still worried when he first told me about his plans. "I just want one job," he explained as he prepared to leave that first time. If this worked out as hoped, he planned to settle down, buy a house and finally experience the as yet elusive 'good life'.

In Ottawa he saw mom and dad on a regular basis, was a member of small congregation and hung out with friends that he'd known most of his life. I asked him if he was worried about being isolated. He shrugged off my question, saying that with all the money he would be making, he could afford to come home once a month. Plus he reminded me that he didn't have much of a life in Ottawa, was tired of hustling; he was ready to give the finger to Ottawa and to never look back.

"Welcome to Fort Crack-Murray" was one of the greetings he received on the first day he arrived in Fort McMurray, Alberta. He laughed, over the phone, as he told me about the greeting. But I didn't

laugh. I had no worries about him falling into drugs, he'd never been a drinker, didn't even smoke. But I really worried that he would be exploited, robbed or mugged. Physically, he was a big guy; words such as 'husky' and 'hefty' would be good descriptors of my brother but he wasn't an aggressive or intimidating man.

We talked several times during his first week in Fort McMurray. He found housing — a room in a basement with a private bathroom but no kitchen. During the first week of two weeks of on the job training, things seemed to be going well. Over the next few weeks the phone calls became less frequent. When I asked about his contract or details about the company his answers became vague. Still it came as a surprise that in less than a month after he'd driven across the country to this new Mecca, he returned to Ottawa unimpressed, uninspired and slightly jaded.

As often happens, the delivery fell short of the promise. He said his training was inadequate; he didn't get the amount of shifts that he was promised and at times he felt that his safety was being compromised. When he complained, his supervisors were unresponsive. And of course everyone knew that he was totally dispensable.

He returned to three part-time jobs with the hope of increased shifts and eventually more steady work. That hasn't panned out. So, less than one year later, he is willing to try again.

Sister

After my sister's long-term relationship dissolved she took on a weekend part-time job. This was in addition to her full-time job during the week. It meant she would be working seven days a week in order to 'make ends meet'. The weekend job consisted of folding hundreds of pieces of linens and towels. The workers — mostly older immigrant women recently arrived from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Caribbean — were stationed on an assembly line: a massive pile of towels and linens would drop from a cage that moved along a wire above these stations. The job was to fold all of this linen in record time and to bring these piles to another station. The cage would come by frequently dropping pile after pile of freshly laundered towels and linens in front of each work station. There were daily quotas, and if you were unable to meet it you would be let go.

My sister worked at this job for three years. She now says that her back, knees and feet are messed up because of the many hours of standing she did during each shift.

Mom

My mom is a writer, like me. But unlike me she doesn't have the luxury of time or the necessity of energy to pursue her creativity. At 62, she spends most of the day on her feet working in the dining room of a senior's residence. She serves meals, clears the dining room and sets up for however many meal services will take place during her shift. She tells me that sometimes she's so tired at the end of a shift, that when she gets home she doesn't make it upstairs to her bedroom; she falls asleep on the couch in her work clothes. Still she writes sporadically; on her days off, on rare evenings when she has energy or in the mornings before she goes to work. She has papers scattered all over her apartment; evidence of her stops and starts. She's looking forward to focusing on writing when she retires.

Dad

Although mom was always with us at night, as I kid I often didn't feel safe enough to fall into a sound sleep until dad was home. But his cleaning jobs were always evening or overnight shifts so staying awake was not always feasible. One early winter morning, I was startled out of sleep by a banging on our apartment door. I couldn't make out what was being said but I knew it was something serious by the formalness of mom's voice. The next morning I learned about the accident: driving home from a late night shift, dad had fallen asleep at the wheel and driven his car into a concrete light post. When I returned home from school at the end of the day, I was frightened by how he looked: a bandaged head, swollen and bruised face and one arm in a sling. He had trouble speaking because of the stitches in his tongue.

Many years later mom told me that he had 'walked' home from the crash; he'd told her he didn't want to call the police or go to the hospital. He ended up not having a choice as the police followed his footsteps and blood trail in the snow right to our apartment door-arriving not long after he did.

Me (then)

I grew up knowing intuitively not to ask for particular things because they were not possibilities: toys, new clothes, shoes, participating in after-school clubs, going to sleepovers or friend's houses. There were no seconds at the dinner table and the kitchen was off-limits between meals. Mom kept a mental inventory of what was in the fridge and cupboards and my siblings and I were warned that we'd have to wait until the next pay day to replace bread, milk, lunchmeat etc. that didn't "stretch" for however long it was supposed to stretch for.

It was normal for my siblings and me to wear ill-fitting or worn out shoes, clothes that we'd 'grown out of' or needed to be 'grown into'. The need for a specific item — grey skirt and blue sweater for the school choir, for instance — was cause for stress. And a request to attend a meeting at school would illicit a monologue from mom: memorable lines included why don't teachers understand that people had to work and wouldn't this 'foolishness' wait and was this meeting going to put food on the table?

As a kid, I knew we were poor but the feelings of shame (that somehow we were to blame for this poverty) only entered my life when my childhood circles expanded beyond my neighbourhood. A recommendation by my Grade 6 French teacher to enroll in a French Immersion program led me to a predominantly white and middle-class junior high school outside of my neighbourhood. As a poor black kid attending a predominantly white, middle-class junior High and then high school not only did I feel different, but I felt less valued in who I was as a person and in my contributions academically and socially. Plaid, pinned down collars and penny loafers dominated my junior high. My family shopped at Giant Tiger and Biway. Giant Tiger and Biway didn't sell Polo, Lacoste or Esprit. The Biway didn't even have a change room. As a kid a logo or brand name did what a surreptitious swig from a micky did in adulthood — provided false courage that helped you make eye contact, initiate conversations, believe for a moment that you were somebody.

In the senior grades of high school I noticed a kind of comradery between middle/upper-class students and teachers. They (teachers and students) spoke with authority about current events, stories in the papers; things that were happening in the world. The participants in

these conversations were mainly students whose families subscribed to the *Ottawa Citizen* or the *Globe and Mail* and discussed news stories over breakfast or at dinner with their parents. Many of these students also went to Mount Tremblant during Christmas break and Florida during March Break. There was no an entry point to these side discussions — they weren't part of the lesson so there were no readings handed out or text to refer to. The assumption that 'we should know these things' hung in the air. To not know these things or share these experiences meant that you remained on the fringes — literally and figuratively.

Mercifully this humiliation/alienation was limited to the school day. At that time there were no cellphones, Facebook or Instagram: I can only imagine how the ability to constantly and instantly post about your activities, and whereabouts, not to mention "selfies", and images of vacations, birthdays and bar mitzvahs adds to the sense of alienation felt by today's economically disadvantaged young people.

A trifecta of circumstances contributed to my educational path. I hesitate to say educational 'success' as I feel that word is loaded with many assumptions. When my siblings and I were reluctant to do our homework my Dad would often say, "Do you want to end up like your mother and me, cleaning up after people?" Despite their unfamiliarity with the Canadian education system and their limited educational achievements, my parents (similar to many immigrants) valued education and instilled that value in my siblings and me.

Falling in with the 'right' crowd was also a significant influence. The right crowd was somewhere between nerds and geeks. Again my parents always warned against "too much friend and company": our job was to focus on school, listen to them and our teachers and whatever other adults spoke to us.

Finally and maybe most significantly, beginning in junior high and continuing throughout high school, several adults took me under their wing. These adults (including teachers, librarians, guidance counsellors and social workers) 'looked out' for me. By Grade 11, I was no longer living at home, due to many circumstances undoubtedly exacerbated by our economic struggles. Seeing a friendly face and knowing that there was at least one adult who had my well-being and interest at heart sometimes made the difference between hope and despair.

Despite all of this, Teacher's College wasn't something that I planned. I think this desire for academic 'success' without knowing how to actually achieve it may be a common experience for many poor people. Economically disadvantaged people are unfamiliar with how the system works and therefore don't know how to navigate, much less "work" the system, as many economically advantaged people do. The poor often end up being casualties of the system with a few lucky exceptions.

Me (now)

A teaching degree, a creative outlet and perhaps a bit of luck and good timing has (for the moment) saved me from joining the (swelling) ranks of the working poor. Unlike many recent Bachelor of Education graduates, I entered the teaching profession at a time when jobs were still available. I was hired as a full-time teacher within several months of graduating from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). With full-time work my first priority was to pay off my student loans. I committed to putting half of my monthly salary toward my student loan payments. Growing up poor, I was used to living on very little, so living on half of my teaching salary wasn't a big challenge. I was in a shared living situation so also had very low expenses.

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Working full-time, I was able to pay off my debt within three years. Without the weight of a large debt I had room to breathe, and that breathing room allowed me to see that I actually did not enjoy teaching full-time. Eventually I transitioned to part-time teaching and then resigned as a full-time teacher and transitioned to occasional teaching. As an Occasional Teacher, I don't have the benefits, wages or security of a full-time teacher. However I do (usually) make enough to cover my living expenses, and have some comforts.

Work that pays a living wage has allowed me to have the kind of life that has eluded my immediate family: one with dignity, choice

and opportunity to dream. It has also allowed me time for reflection. I was able to look at my life and to understand that my and my family's challenges were not about personal failure. There were and still are about systemic and structural obstacles that create, sustain and entrench economic disadvantage. In the end it's our society that suffers the greatest loss with fractured families, hollowed-out communities and individuals who are not able to reach or even explore their full human potential.

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