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BRICKLAYER'S SON: THE BIRTH AND CLASH OF VALUES



My father and I were college buddies back in the late 1970s.

While I was in class at Columbia, struggling with the esoterica du jour, he was on a bricklayer's scaffold not far up the street, working on a campus building. Once, we met up on the subway going home—he with his tools, I with my books. We didn't chat much about what went on during the day. My father wasn't interested in Thucydides, and I wasn't up on arches. We shared a *New York Post* and talked about the Mets.

My dad has built lots of places in New York City he can't get into: colleges, condos, office towers. He made his living on the outside. Once the walls were up, a place took on a different feel for him, as though he wasn't welcome anymore. It never bothered my dad, though. For him, earning the dough that helped pay for my entree into a fancy, bricked-in institution was satisfaction enough, a vicarious access.

We didn't know it then, but those days were the start of a branching off—a redefining of what it means to be a workingman in our Italian-American family. Related by blood, we're separated by class, my

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father and I. Being the white-collar child of a blue-collar parent means being the hinge on the door between two ways of life. With one foot in the working class, the other in the middle class, people like me are Straddlers, at home in neither world, living a limbo life. It's the part of the American Dream you may have never heard about: the costs of social mobility. People pay with their anxiety about their place in life. It's a discomfort many never overcome.

What drove me to leave what I knew? Born blue-collar, I still never felt completely comfortable among the tough guys and anti-intellectual crowd who populated much of my neighborhood in deepest Brooklyn, part of a populous, insular working-class sector of commercial strips, small apartment buildings, and two-family homes. I never did completely fit in among the preppies and suburban royalty of Columbia, either. It's like that for Straddlers, who live with an uneasiness about their dual identity that can be hard to reconcile, no matter how far from the old neighborhood they eventually get. Ultimately, "it is very difficult to escape culturally from the class into which you are born," Paul Fussell's influential book *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*¹ quotes George Orwell as saying. The grip is that tight. That's something Straddlers like me understand. There are parts of me that are proudly, stubbornly working class, despite my love of high tea, raspberry vinaigrette, and National Public Radio. Born with a street brawler's temperament, I possess an Ivy League circuit breaker to keep things in check. Still, I've been accused of having an edge, a chip I've balanced on my shoulder since my days in the old neighborhood.

It was not so smooth jumping from Italian old-world style to U.S. professional in a single generation. Others who were the first in their families to go to college will tell you the same thing: The academy can render you unrecognizable to the very people who launched you into the world. The ideas and values absorbed in college challenge the mom-and-pop orthodoxy that passed for truth for 18 years. Limbo folk may eschew polyester blends for sea-isle cotton, prefer Brie to Kraft slices. They marry outside the neighborhood and raise their kids differently. They might not be in church on Sunday.

When they pick careers (not *jobs* like their parents had, but *careers*), it's often a kind of work their parents never heard of or can't understand. But for the white-collar kids of blue-collar parents, the

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office is not necessarily a sanctuary. In corporate America, where the rules are based on notions foreign to working-class people, a Straddler can get lost.

Social class counts at the office, even though nobody likes to admit it. Ultimately, corporate norms are based on middle- and upper-class values, business types say. From an early age, middle-class people learn how to get along, using diplomacy, nuance, and politics to grab what they need. It is as though they are following a set of rules laid out in a manual that blue-collar families never have the chance to read.

People born into the middle class to parents with college degrees have lived lives filled with what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.”² Growing up in an educated, advantaged environment, they learn about Picasso and Mozart, stock portfolios and *crème brûlée*. In a home with cultural capital, there are networks: Someone always has an aunt or golfing buddy with the inside track for an internship or some entry-level job. Dinner-table talk could involve what happened that day to Mom and Dad at the law firm, the doctor's office, or the executive suite.

Middle-class kids can grow up with what sociologists describe as a sense of entitlement that will carry them through their lives. This “belongingness” is not just related to having material means; it has to do with learning and possessing confidence in your place in the world. The bourgeois, Bourdieu says, pass on self-certainty like a treasured heirloom, from generation to generation.³ Such early access and direct exposure to culture in the home is the more organic, “legitimate” means of appropriating cultural capital, Bourdieu tells us.⁴ Those of us possessing “ill-gotten culture”—the ones who did not hear Schubert or see a Breughel until freshman year in college, the ones who grew up without knowing a friend whose parents attended college—can learn it, but never as well. Something is always a little off about us, like an engine with imprecise timing.

There's a greater match between middle-class lives and the institutions in which the middle class works and operates—whether they are universities or corporations. Children of the middle and upper classes have been speaking the language of the bosses and supervisors forever. An interesting fact: The number of words spoken in a white-collar household in a day is, on average, three times greater than the number

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spoken in a blue-collar home (especially the talk between parents and kids), says pioneering working-class studies economist Charles Sackrey, formerly of Bucknell University.

Blue-collar kids are taught by their parents and communities to work hard to achieve, and that merit is rewarded. But no blue-collar parent knows whether such things are true in the middle-class world. Many professionals born to the working class report feeling out of place and outmaneuvered in the office. Soon enough, Straddlers learn that straight talk won't always cut it in shirt-and-tie America, where people rarely say what they mean. Resolving conflicts head-on and speaking your mind don't always work, no matter how educated the Straddler is.

In the working class, people perform jobs in which they are closely supervised and are required to follow orders and instructions. That in turn affects how they socialize their children, social scientists tell us. Children of the working class are brought up in a home in which conformity, obedience, and intolerance for back talk are the norm—the same characteristics that make for a good factory worker. As Massachusetts Straddler Nancy Dean says, “We’re raised to do what our mother says, what the teacher says, what the boss says. Just keep your mouth shut. No one cares what you have to say: Don’t ask, don’t question, do what you’re told. Our mothers were all versions of Mrs. This Is My House.”

People moving from the working class to the middle class need a strategy, a way to figure out the rules, the food, the language, and the music. “It’s a new neighborhood,” Sackrey says, “and it has the danger of a new neighborhood. It’s unfriendly territory. Upper-class people *do* look down on us. So in your strategy for living, you have to figure out how to make it from one day to the next. It’s an endless trek. You can fit in; you can decide to overwhelm and be better than them; you can live in the middle class but refuse to assimilate; or you can stand aside and criticize, and never be part of things.

“But central to the whole thing is language. If you don’t talk like them, they won’t give you the time of day.”

The Uneven Race

Americans have always embraced the notion that this is a land of opportunity, with rags-to-riches possibilities. It’s true that there are

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apples to be picked, but one can argue that not everyone has equal access to the fruit. We begin in different places, with some of us already two laps ahead when the starter's gun goes bang. The family you're born into may well have more influence on your future success than any other single factor, says Brookings Institution economist Isabel Sawhill. To ensure a rosy future, social scientists who study mobility love to say, "Pick your parents well."

If someone gets ahead, our national philosophy goes, it's because they worked harder. Statistics show that there are people who worked just as hard, but were unfortunate enough to have been born on the 2 yard line and not the 42. If your parents are in the upper tier of white-collar folks, there's a 60 percent chance you will be, too, mobility experts say. If, on the other hand, your parents are manual workers, your chances of getting into those clean and well-paying jobs are less than 30 percent, no matter how many hours you put in.⁵ Surveys show that two out of three middle- and upper-class high school graduates attended a four-year college, as compared to just one of five from the working and lower classes.⁶

Mobility expert Michael Hout, of the University of California at Berkeley, says that downward mobility has increased 7 percent over the last 30 years, without much increase in upward mobility. He says that roughly 50 percent move up, 40 percent move down, and 10 percent remain immobile. Even if a blue-collar-born person winds up with the same job as someone originating from the middle class—thanks to college scholarships—the middle-class person would not know the journey the working-class person made. That odyssey, some say, makes all the difference in how one ultimately views the world.

Laying the Groundwork

Although they wanted me to climb out of the working class, my parents would have picked a different middle-class life for me. They foresaw a large bank account, a big house down the street from theirs, and a standing date for Sunday macaroni. My father had a tough time accepting my decision to become a mere newspaper reporter, a field that pays a little more than construction does. He long wondered why I hadn't cashed in on that multibrick education and taken on some lawyer-lucrative job. After bricklaying for 30 years, my father promised himself I'd never pile

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bricks and blocks into walls for a living. He and my mother figured that an education—genie-like and benevolent—would somehow rocket me into the rarefied trajectory of the upwardly mobile and load some serious loot into my pockets. My desire to work at something interesting to me rather than merely profitable was hard to fathom. Here I was breaking blue-collar rule number one: Make as much money as you can, to pay for as good a life as you can get. My father would try to teach me what my goals should be when I was 19, my collar already fading to white. I was the college boy who handed him the wrong wrench on help-around-the-house Saturdays. “You’d better make a lot of money,” my dad wryly warned me as we huddled in front of a disassembled dishwasher I had neither the inclination nor the aptitude to fix. “You’re gonna need to hire someone to hammer a nail into a wall for you when you get your own house.”

My interests had always lain elsewhere. Like a lot of Straddlers, I felt dissatisfied with the neighborhood status quo. That sense of being out of step with the very people you’re supposed to be like is the limbo person’s first inkling that he or she is bound for other places. For the longest time, though, I tried to fit in. I mean, I chased girls and played ball and lifted weights—the approved pastimes that keep you from getting beaten up in working-class New York. I even had my high school record for consecutive sit-ups (801 in 35 minutes), a bizarre but marginally acceptable athletic accomplishment. It showed toughness, a certain willingness to absorb punishment, which in turn demonstrated manliness. In blue-collar society, proving your manly worth is high achievement. But truly, I never really liked hanging out on the corner, shooting the bull with the fellas. Weeknights, I studied while the guys partied. By the weekend, they were too far advanced for me to truly catch up. I just didn’t share their interests—like cars. I never wanted to hunch over the engine of a Mustang, monkey with the pistons, and drain the oil. People think New Yorkers don’t drive, but that’s just in Manhattan. Car culture was big in Brooklyn, as it is in most of America, and kids lavished attention on their rides. Chrome had to gleam in streetlight on the cruise down 86th Street on Saturday night. (That, by the way, is the very place John Travolta struts at the beginning of *Saturday Night Fever*, the movie that told the story of a few of the guys I went to high school with—people who tried for something better than

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the neighborhood.) I knew a young woman whose boyfriend gave her whitewalls for her eighteenth birthday, and she squealed as if they were opals. I got my first car when I was 23 and drove it to Ohio to work at my first white-collar job. It broke down often, but I had no inclination to figure out what was wrong and fix it. Somehow, growing up, I was bereft of any curiosity about how things worked—how drywall was put up or how pipes connected—the very real working-class stuff that preoccupied the lives of most of the people around me. I just didn't care. I read books. That came from my mother, a latchkey child who was never allowed to grow intellectually. She nevertheless became a book-a-week reader and had determined that her sons would follow suit, then advance to the higher education that had been denied her.

My mother was bucking a trend; many working-class people in the 1970s saw little need for college. The guys were encouraged to make money in construction and similar tough fields, while the women were expected to find men and breed. As a result, working-class kids from all ethnic backgrounds reproduce their parents' class standing with an eerie Xeroxity—often more rags-to-rags than rags-to-riches, working-class studies guru Jake Ryan says.

Navigating Social Relationships

Straddlers remember how complicated life in the old neighborhood could get after they realized they weren't really part of the crowd. Their inability to fully fit in made them uncomfortable and rendered them quasi-outcasts.

Back in the day, I couldn't compete for the attention of girls as long as there were dark-haired high school dropouts with steady jobs prowling the neighborhood in cool cars. These guys had pocket money to bestow Marlboros and birthday jewelry; they weren't locked away studying, and they had time to focus on showing girls a good time. In Bensonhurst, I'd be at a bus stop after school, trying to get close to a girl, reaching for whatever charm my heritage would provide. Just when I'd be making progress, one of my fellow *cugines* (cousins) would show up in his new white Cadillac with red-leather interior and a horn that played the first 12 notes to the theme song from *The Godfather*. "Yo, Marie, want a ride?" he'd call out, and away my dark-haired lovely

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would fly. There I'd be left standing, jerk with a bulging book bag and a bus pass, suddenly alone, waiting for the No. 6 bus and a lonely ride home.

So I didn't fit in. I was smart and got good grades, but I didn't care about Camaros. This earned me the sobriquet of "fag." It was bad to be called this. It had nothing to do with homosexuality. My sin was that I had the brains to pass social studies. It didn't bother me that much. I still got into fights and played guitar in neighborhood bands with my brother, which meant I wasn't a hopeless case. But I felt just as at home in the library as on the concrete basketball court—not something to boast about. My mother bought a blackboard and used it to teach me to read. When I got older, she let me loose in the stacks, hoping I'd find what she did. "Just read," she'd tell me, figuring the books would do the rest—pull me up and pull me away.

There were a lot of good reasons to go. I will always love aspects of blue-collar culture that live on in me—the whatever-it-takes work ethic, the lack of pretense, people's forthright manner—but working-class Brooklyn could be crowded and mean. In our first apartment, in the back of a two-story brick box built 200 feet from the elevated F train, I learned to sleep despite the endless rumble of the train cars and the metal-on-metal screech of the brakes. We lived so close and tight, we could hear arguments and lovemaking, squalling babies, and the disapproving squawks of meddling in-laws. Nothing was secret thanks to the thin walls, which showered cheap carpets with plaster chips whenever overwhelmed blue-collar family men would punch them in impotent frustration. There was a surfeit of anger and fear and alcohol. Men's jobs were hard and sapping. Women's afternoons with babies were long and relentless. The dominant themes, as social researcher Lillian Breslow Rubin writes, were struggle and trouble.⁷ In my neighborhood, the son of a man we knew stole from his father's restaurant for drug money; an immature teenager joined the Marines during the height of the Vietnam War, compelling his father to go into debt to the local Mafia don, who somehow had the enlistment undone for a hefty fee; a depressed wife weakened and gave in to the blue-eyed pizza man from northern Italy, blowing a hole in her marriage. Survival, as Rubin writes, was a frantic scramble to keep the kids fed and the rent paid. This rough life, she writes, engendered "fatalism, passivity, resignation."⁸

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Most fathers collapsed in front of the tube at the end of the day, incapable of anything else. Kids were shushed and ordered to sneak silently past these half-dead grizzlies, whose self-esteem was often undermined by jobs devoid of creativity, freedom, or flexibility. Sometimes after dinner, a few of the men with energy would tinker with their cars, habits left over from younger, better days. It allowed them, as Rubin writes, a sense of mastery not permitted at work, a project to complete without a boss carping about its progress or quality.⁹ Of course, wives weren't happy about this withdrawal from the family. And so arguments would start, and hard days would end badly.

People believed the workingman was getting shafted, and they seethed. Perceived societal breaks for minorities made the frustrated white guys of my world crazy. Later, my Marxist professors would say it's how the haves always did it, letting the white and black proles cut each other for crumbs while The Man ate his cutlet in peace. Adults looked the other way when on-the-boil teenagers would beat up strangers—read: black people—unfortunate enough to wander through the neighborhood.

Racism was as common as diaper rash. People would pepper conversations with casual prejudicial judgments, which always made me uncomfortable, because I never understood the source of that anger. The night I saw the movie *Rocky*, a 20-year-old guy jumped from his seat in the theater during the climactic fight scene and screamed racial epithets at the screen. I shrank down in my seat, embarrassed, as many in the movie house applauded his outburst. White Straddlers will say that racism was one of the first things that separated them from their friends. Because they did not share the prejudice, they felt out of rhythm with the neighborhood vibe. Their apparent lack of race animosity made them objects of local suspicion.

I never really recognized class differences in my everyday world when I was very young. Everyone in my neighborhood floated in the same listing boat, tied to the same fate. I remember, though, watching TV and being confused by *The Brady Bunch*—the lawn, the house with two stories, the maid, the backyard fence (that grassy backyard!), and the father with the apparently untaxing job. Our fathers worked, Jack. Real work. Many Straddlers will say that blue-collaring is the more genuine of lives, in greater proximity to primordial manhood. Surely, my

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father was more resourceful than Mr. Brady. He was provider and protector, concerned only with the basics: food and home, love, and progeny. He's also a generation closer to the heritage, a warmer spot nearer the fire that forged and defined us. Does heat dissipate and light fade farther from the source?

Blue-Collar Values

I idealized my dad as a kind of dawn-rising priest of labor, engaged in holy ritual. Up at five every morning, my father made a religion of responsibility. My brother Christopher, who has two degrees from Columbia and is now an executive with the blue-collar sense to make a great white-collar salary, says he always felt safe when he heard Dad stir before him, "as if Pop were taming the day for us." As he aged, my father was expected to put out as if he were decades younger, slipping on machine-washable vestments of khaki cotton without waking my mother. He'd go into the kitchen and turn on the radio to catch the temperature. Bricklayers have an occupational need to know the weather. And because I am my father's son, I can still recite the five-day forecast at any given moment.

My dad wasn't crazy about the bricklayer's life. He had wanted to be a singer and an actor when he was young, but that was frivolous doodling to his immigrant father, who expected money to be coming in, stoking the stove that kept the hearth fires ablaze. Dreams simply were not energy-efficient. After combat duty in Korea, my dad returned home, learned his father-in-law's trade, and acquiesced to a life of backbreaking routine. He says he can't find the black-and-white publicity glossies he once had made. So many limbo folk witnessed the shelving of their blue-collar parents' dreams. Most, like my dad, made the best of it, although a few disappointed people would grow to resent their own children's chances, some Straddlers say.

As kids, Chris and I joked about our father's would-be singing career, wondering where we all would have been had he become rich and famous. His name is Vincent, but everyone calls him Jimmy. So my brother and I dubbed him "Jimmy Vincent," or "Jimmy V. From Across the Sea," a Jerry Vale type with sharper looks and a better set of pipes. As a young man, my father was tall and slender, with large brown eyes

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and dark hair. He was careful about his appearance, always concerned with pants pleats, pressed shirt cuffs, and the shine on his shoes.

One of our too-close neighbors once told him they liked it when Dad took a shower because of the inevitable tile-enhanced concert he'd provide. When one of my father's sisters died and Pop stopped singing for a while, the neighbor noticed and asked my father what was wrong.

There was a lot about Brooklyn I felt close to. Much about working-class life is admirable and fine. The trick is to avoid glorifying it without painting life in it too darkly. Sure, we lived with a few *cafones*—what some thought of as the low-class losers (there were classes among the working class, too—a pecking order based on taste, dignity, and intelligence). But the very best of blue-collar culture is something I still celebrate in myself and look for in others I meet. The values are an essential defining factor:

A well-developed work ethic, the kind that gets you up early and keeps you locked in until the job is done, regardless of how odious or personally distasteful the task.

A respect for your parents that is nothing short of religious, something I was amazed to find was not shared among the kids with whom I went to college and graduate school.

The need for close contact with extended family—aunts, uncles, and grandparents—each of whom had the authority to whack you in the back of the head should your behavior call for it.

An open and honest manner devoid of hidden agenda and messy subtext. You say something, you mean it.

Other things, too: loyalty; a sense of solidarity with people you live and work with; an understanding and appreciation of what it takes to get somewhere in a hard world where no one gives you a break; a sense of daring; and a physicality that's honest, basic, and attractive. (When I worked for *New York Newsday*, a disgruntled reader had been stalking me and persistently threatening my life. A colleague suggested I get a "goon" to protect me. An editor answered, "Alfred doesn't need a goon. Alfred is a goon.")

We could, between money troubles and family crises, recognize the good in life. Nobody laughs like blue-collar people, who are unashamed to pound the table in gasping recognition of a pure truth, a glaring absurdity, or a sharp irony. I have seen relatives grab onto each other for



support in tear-blurred spasms of guffawing that nearly choke them. It's fun to watch.

Class Distinctions and Clashes

Blue-collar origins implant defining characteristics that will cause conflict throughout a life. Straddlers and social scientists can point to specific differences in manner, style, thought, and approach to life that are class-based. Because there's no exact science to this, much comes from observation and opinion. It's still useful to understand, though, because it demonstrates that people think in terms of class all the time. And while it may be hard for them to define precisely, they know class differences when they see them. Interestingly, among Straddlers, resentments toward the middle class are never far below the surface.

"We working-class people have an appreciation for people no matter what they do," asserts Peter Ciotta, director of communications for a \$1.6 billion food company in Buffalo. "And we have to outwork people because we have no connections. We're not going to get invited to the party."

James Neal, a Midwest medical malpractice attorney, who woke up at 4 A.M. on his parents' farm each day and went to school stinking of animals, says he takes special delight in facing off against silver-spoon lawyers and doctors because he believes they're so arrogant. "You just don't find a hell of a lot of arrogant working-class people. And blue-collar people say what they mean. In the end, I avoid people with a sense of entitlement. Until you've had hard times, you're not a complete person. And if you've never had them, well, a whole hunk of you is missing."

Struggle, the working class will tell you, is central to blue-collar life and the chief architect of character. Journalist Samme Chittum, a former college instructor who grew up in small-town Illinois, understands that. "The middle class knows what money bestows on you. Not what it can buy, but what it bestows. It's the intangible things—privilege, privacy, immunity from the vagaries of fortune that people who have to struggle are open to. It would be socially immature to be envious of these people; there are so many others in the world whose stack of poker chips is smaller than mine. But white-collar kids did not have to bust

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their asses for everything they've got. They came equipped with helium balloons to raise them to a higher stratosphere where things just come to you.

"But if you want a dirty job done, give it to me. I will do the hard job. I'll move 50 pieces of furniture up the stairs, take rocks out of the garden. I will push until the job's done or until I fall over. I don't understand letting others do things for you, or spending your social currency to get favors. I have a scorn for that."

The heritage of struggle, as writer and working-class academic Janet Zandy puts it, develops a built-in collectivity in the working class, a sense of people helping each other—you're not going it alone, and you have buddies to watch your back. It's different in the middle class, Zandy and others argue, where the emphasis is on individual achievement and personal ambition. The middle class, my Straddlers would say, rarely had to pay working-class-type dues and were most likely unaware of the help they got—the cultural capital—to ensure their sinecures in life and business.

If you could get through college without having to work at some outside job or take out loans, for example, that says you did not know privation, and that, in turn, says something about you and your class. If your parents gave you the down payment on your house (Straddlers often hate hearing this one), that tells us something about you as well. Straddlers tend to see the family dynamic as struggle, and they learn to accept it. You never expect things to be easy, and you don't whine when they're not. Nothing is promised, so nothing is expected. "My father's goal for me," says Los Angeles Straddler Jeffrey Orridge, a Mattel executive, "was to be able to eat. Not to drive a Mercedes. Just to eat." The working class is told that anything you get you earn by hard work. "Our family was pain and anguish," says Sacramento Straddler Andrea Todd, a freelance magazine writer and editor. "I saw my dad—a firefighter—sacrifice his well-being to put food on the table. The middle-class girls I knew didn't see that, didn't know that."

While middle-class kids are allowed some say and voice in their upbringing ("David, would you prefer going to Grandma's or to the park?"), working-class kids develop within a strict, authoritarian world ("David, if you don't come with me to Grandma's right now I'll slap your teeth out!") Experts say that children raised in authoritarian

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homes do less well in school than kids from less regimented middle-class environments. Without meaning to, says Hamilton College sociologist Dennis Gilbert, the parent who stresses obedience over curiosity is championing the values of the working class, and helping to keep their kids in it.¹⁰

Temple University sociologist Annette Lareau did some interesting work in this area, she tells me. Studying 88 African-American and white children from the Northeast and the Midwest who were between the ages of 8 and 10, Lareau was able to see distinct differences in the way working-class and middle-class kids are raised. In fact, she concludes, the importance of class influence in their upbringing was greater even than that of race.¹¹

Class Flash Cards: Perceptions Are as Real as Origins

I asked Straddlers and working-class studies types to list class-based traits to help understand what the classes look like. Some truly believe class in America is akin to a caste system of different values and outlooks. Ultimately, working-class and middle-class cultures are based on different foundations, says Minnesota psychologist Barbara Jensen, herself a Straddler. The core value of the working class is being part of a like-minded group—a family, a union, or a community, which engenders a strong sense of loyalty. The core value of the middle class is achievement by the individual.

The middle class, Jensen says, is solipsistic, seeing nothing but its own culture. That's made easier by the fact that the middle class literally writes our culture. Movies, books, the news media, and television are creations of the middle class. Working-class people see little of themselves in popular culture. (There are exceptions of course: *Working Girl*, *Norma Rae*, *Roseanne*. But by and large, Jensen's observation holds true.) As such, the middle class gets to see complex depictions of itself, while working-class people view mostly stereotypes of themselves.

What else? Jensen provided me with class "flash cards," for lack of a better term—quick observations that separate the workers from the managers, the corner boys from the corner-office boys. Obviously, none of these are hard-and-fast rules. They are traits and tendencies gleaned from observation and study, and are by no means scientific:

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Working-class people mistrust eggheads, relying more on intuition, common sense, and luck. The middle class is more analytical, depending on cultivated, logical thinking.

In a social setting, the working class may be more apt to show emotion than the middle class. The working class may be tougher, flashier, and louder.

Working-class people are overawed by doctors and lawyers. The middle class knows how to talk to such folks and realizes they are just as fallible and corrupt as the rest of us.

The middle class is burdened with the pressure to outachieve high-achieving parents. Many working-class families are happy if their kids get and keep a job and avoid being seen on *America's Most Wanted*.

The working class will bowl; the middle class will play racquetball. At Columbia, where physical education was a requirement for graduation, they taught us squash and racquetball, trying to tutor future lawyers and leaders on the finer points of business leisure. I played it like a neighborhood kid, diving into the walls and feeling a sense of accomplishment when I nearly separated my shoulder. I was never that good, because I played too blue-collar, too straight-ahead, and never studied the angles and the corner shots. It was nothing like the stickball, stoopball, and handball we played in Brooklyn. In summer softball games, I used to think I could play center field because our cement parks were so small. Then I moved to Ohio and played in lovely suburban fields, watching ball after ball get by me. I couldn't cover the vast territory, green and endless. I switched to first base.

The working class has traditionally expressed a my-country-right-or-wrong patriotic attitude, while the middle class often has questioned government, Jensen says. The obvious example is the Vietnam War era, when working-class kids died in jungles, and middle-class kids protested on campuses.

There's a greater depth of acquiescence among working class people, who tend to feel more powerless: You can't fight city hall. The middle class says you can, and there's more of a constant striving toward self-hood and becoming something else. The working-class man or woman says, "I am what I am." The middle-class person says, "I have to do this [graduate from college, go to business school, pass the bar] to become who I am."

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Regarding racism, everyone is guilty. Minority straddlers will say the working class is overt in its prejudices, while the middle class is surreptitious, devious, and hypocritical. Ultimately, writes social critic bell hooks, blacks fear poor and working-class whites more because, historically, they have acted out their hatred in more violent forms.¹²

The working class works at jobs that bite, maim, and wither. The middle class gets to work indoors at desks. This can be stressful, of course, but as Andrew Levison points out in Fussell's book, office buildings don't implode like coal mines, and professors aren't subjected to industrial noises that destroy their hearing.¹³

Finally, Jensen says, the working class sends out Christmas cards that say, "Love, X." The middle class circulates Christmas newsletters, with proud news of Timmy's adventures in the fourth grade.

Obviously, people are more than just class. We all embody interlocking cultures—ethnicities, races, and genders. We possess different skills and inclinations. Still, imprecise as many of the flash cards are, they do reflect people's perceptions.¹⁴

In Brooklyn, I used to notice people eyeing each other across the class divide. Older, ethnic working-class women in housedresses would sit on their stoops on summer evenings and watch the single, yuppie women trudge home from Manhattan offices at 8 P.M., carrying their small, Korean-grocer salads in white plastic bags. The old women would laugh, then shake their heads at what they saw as the empty, ascetic lives devoid of children, real food, and steady men. The yuppies, I'm sure, had their own thoughts about overweight, middle-aged women with limited horizons, bad clothes, and inattentive husbands.

Smaller class-based skirmishes go on daily in offices, with janitors, secretaries, and maintenance people on one side, and CEOs, executives, and tech people on the other. It happens everywhere; it happens every day. The perceptions we all have of the other side can have a greater impact than reality.

F Train: Lifeline from the Past to the Future

When we were young, my mother took Chris and me into Manhattan on special days. I think she wanted to show us there was grace in this world. We visited museums, Radio City Music Hall, and the top of the

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Empire State Building. I remember climbing the metal stairs to the F train and noticing the train direction signs: "To City" and "From City." Though Brooklyn was as much a part of New York as Manhattan, sign makers understood the sociological divide provided by the East River, the sense that Brooklyn wasn't the real New York. If people in my neighborhood said, "I'm going to the city," everyone knew what they meant. They were headed to Manhattan, the place with the water-beading high gloss, the island polished clean by money. They were traveling from the borough of workers to the borough of work. Straddlers told me they lived for such moments in their own lives: a trip out of the drab hometown to some Oz of light and rich circumstance. These forays provided knowledge and hope of something better.

The silvery train car with orange seats smelled like sweat, perfume, and urine—a Brooklyn potpourri. We rode past tight houses made dingy by train soot. We felt special as we viewed the narrow streets from above, as though we were not part of them—at least not today. At the Smith and 9th Street station, the F train arced high into the air, and suddenly you could see the harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Vistas shifted as the train lurched forward. We got a glimpse of the skyline, spiky and shining, across the water, beyond the airless gray grid of Brooklyn. The world suddenly opened up, and we were aware of a new kind of geography, a new way things could look. When we got to our stop, we squeezed out of the car and climbed out of the subway. That moment when you slowly rise out of the train hole onto a Manhattan street is something that still excites me even now, so many rides later. Your senses acclimate in stages. First you hear the traffic, denser and more intense than in Brooklyn. Then you smell roasting chestnuts and bus exhaust. Finally, as you reach the sidewalk, you see the buildings, outsized and overwhelming, and you think the sign makers were right about the "To City" thing, because this is nothing like home.

Manhattan had wealth. Women wore furs; limos choked the streets. As a working-class person, you could partake of it in bits and enjoy its plenitude at the edges: Eat soup at Lord & Taylor without necessarily buying clothes, then light a candle at St. Patrick's Cathedral, gawking at the opulence in both places. My mother taught us to find a hotel if we needed a bathroom, and I'd feign bladder emergencies just to see Manhattan's grand lobbies.

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Sometimes, we'd simply look at the buildings on which my father and grandfather had worked. My grandfather was Ellis Island, Class of 1914. As a kid, he boxed and performed gymnastics on piles of horse manure dumped by the city in empty lots. Once, he lifted his junior high school principal and hung him on a clothes hook in a classroom wardrobe. "Guy deserved it," my grandfather said, and we believed him. He was handsome, with his mustache, thick hair, and eye twinkle. George Clooney looks so much like him in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* that my mother cried when she saw it. Now when the urge strikes, I can go to New York and see his handiwork—run my hands over the bricks that line the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway or any one of dozens of places that look like buildings to you but are monuments to me. He saw New York as two things: the deepwater port of possibility where you could make enough money to buy a place for your wife and raise your three daughters, and the lunatic town where punks sprayed graffiti over his bricks. He died when crack was big, and the city's renegade feel had soured him. Several Straddlers told me about a blue-collar elder who impressed them as much as my grandfather did me. These tough-guy old-timers possessed a characteristic—strength, or dignity, or willfulness—that Straddlers tried to emulate in their own lives. While working-class machismo doesn't always serve a Straddler well, sometimes just the knowledge that they share genes with people of courage can help a limbo man or woman through the hard days and nights.

I liked knowing my grandfather's DNA was coiled down inside me somewhere. He was decent, responsible, and tough. Tough is good, I told myself. Taking what you want is good.

We wanted so much. When I got older, I would schlep to Manhattan with my friends whenever I could, drawn by its transcendent promise. We wondered whether Manhattan girls kissed differently, talked differently, or smelled nicer. We yearned to connect with the city's central circuit, to splice into the main wiring and vibrate with the energy and buzz of the crazy place. As kids, Straddlers were naturally drawn to the kinetic doings outside the same old circle they would soon dismiss as dull and predictable. Hungering for something more, they thrust themselves into shimmering middle- and upper-class spaces, eyeing new experience like pacing young tigers eager to pounce. There we'd be

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outside clubs, the dreaded bridge-and-tunnel boys from disfavored area codes, wearing disastrous clothes—stonewashed jeans and Converse sneakers. Doormen knew to exclude us, and they did so without a second thought. We were the help—the stockboys and the busboys, the guys from nowhere, left out in the cold in Members Only jackets. You could find my clueless kind outside places like Studio 54 or Limelight, an old church-turned-nightclub that had a decadent Mardi Gras/cabaret vibe. Kenny Kenny, the fabulous drag-queen doorman in a plaid green Vivienne Westwood dress, polished Army boots, and Kabuki makeup, oversaw the midnight encampment of wannabes that gathered even in the coldest weather: giggling 20-year-old men wearing tight skirts beneath their coats; unsmiling young women adhering to a strict black-only dress code; easy-smiling Hugo Boss hunks, angst-free and existentially secure, used to taking life's beaches like sharp-dressed Marines. Then there'd be guys like us, passed over for inspection in favor of preppies and outlanders from the Midwest or wherever, who have traditionally flocked to the city to begin careers.

E.B. White once wrote that there are three New Yorks: the city of commuters, whom he disdained as locusts who feasted on what the city offered, then left before it got too late in the evening; the city of natives like me, who, he said, took the town too much for granted; and the city of people born elsewhere in the country, the group upon which he showered favor. He said they were the special ones, the talented newcomers who gave New York its passion and artistry.¹⁵

I just thought of them as supercompetitive types, the people voted most likely to kidney-stab you with a cafeteria spoon to get ahead. We noticed that a disproportionate number came from the middle and upper classes, because no matter how lowly a job they toiled at, they always seemed to have money to spend at night. Trust-fund drunkards, they were the fools who staggered to their feet in bars at 2 A.M. when the jukebox played Sinatra's "New York, New York." It was the outsiders' anthem, the song they sang to themselves to remind one another that they had left Missouri or wherever behind and were now making it in the Apple. Well, these ersatz New Yorkers took our places on the dance floor, took our women, and took our seat at the table. That's what we told ourselves, anyway, as we worked ourselves into a low-boiling class rage. Once a Straddler wandered beyond the neighborhood to see what

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the world could offer, it was not unusual for the person to grow resentful of people perceived to be enjoying all of life's goodies. We wanted what they possessed—their polish, their worldliness, and the apparent control they had over their lives.

This was the basis for my beef with Caroline Kennedy. When I decided in high school that I wanted to be a reporter, I applied to be a copyboy at the New York *Daily News*, the spirited, blue-collar tabloid that talked tough and spoke to my people. My father would read the *Daily News* out loud to us over breakfast on Saturday mornings. He and my mother would laugh at the latest outrages of politicians and assorted city scoundrels. Here, I figured, they'd give the workingman a break. When I was 18, I wrote a nice letter to the editors about my father and the breakfast table and his loyalty to his union. They told me, sorry, they weren't hiring copyboys. Then I read a few days later that the editors had given a copyboy's job to Caroline Kennedy, who I am sure is a lovely person. But still. So it's like that? I said to myself. The workingman's newspaper was populated by starry-eyed, class-conscious folk just like at the *New York Times*? Years later, when I was interviewing for a reporting job at the *Daily News*, I made a point of mentioning the Kennedy story to the editor. I told him, "You guys owe me." The editor, whose father had been a cop, must have appreciated my attitude, because he hired me. One Straddler recognized another. He saw his own class journey mirrored in mine and figured I was worth a chance. Many Straddlers say they treasured any such connection to a fellow traveler in the workplace, because it made them feel less alone.

Dreams of Escape

It was a close call, the blue-collar life. I got my first job at 16, working as a stockboy for Leo's Discounts after school. Leo was a no-nonsense, working-class Jewish guy, an ex-boxer and a relative of Jerry Stiller. His daughter was always trying to break into show business via the family connection. Bald and muscled, Leo told me how you could irritate a fighter's ears by constantly sliding the laces of your boxing gloves across them. My job was boring: storing 100-box deliveries in a dark, filthy basement and filling the shelves with toothpaste, disposable diapers, and deodorant. For some reason, Leo placed all the feminine products

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up high on the shelves. Embarrassed women would have to ask me (I was nearly my adult 6-foot-3) to reach up for them. A few of them were just a little older than me, already saddled with kids. They were dark and beautiful neighborhood women, older versions of the girls who'd abandon me at bus stops. This is what happens, I told myself, after a few rides in the car. Entire lives could be mapped and plotted with relative accuracy, beginning with the moment they slid next to a guy in a Lincoln with leather seats: marriage, Pampers from Leo's, endless Sundays with the in-laws, and boredom and joyless toil for a lot of years. That scared me. Suddenly, I could see what my parents were talking about—how college was important. "Otherwise," my father would say, "I got a shovel in the garage waiting for you." Only today can I appreciate the true significance of what he was saying; my father was telling me not to be like him. How hard that must have been to carry in his head. By telling their kids to go to college and rise above them, working-class fathers offer their lives not as role models to emulate—as middle-class parents can—but as mistakes to avoid, say social commentators Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb.¹⁶ My father held himself out as a negative object lesson. If you don't do your homework, ace the test, and apply to college, you'll wind up laying bricks. You'll wind up being just like me. What does that make a father feel like, to have to instruct his son not to be like the old man?

When I was about to graduate from high school, Leo pulled me aside and asked me whether I wanted to learn the business. His starstruck daughter sure didn't. He was offering me a blue-collar future, something what would have been considered a decent existence for a neighborhood kid like me. I projected my life into it, stuffed inside a 900-square-foot store over a basement filled with rats and cans of Lysol, forever fetching tampons—then eventually adult diapers—for customers who'd be aging along with me, tied to the insular, isolated neighborhood. It was sweet that he asked. But I gotta go to college, I told him.

It's always interesting to hear how Straddlers describe their backgrounds. Some sentimentalize it; some remember it with contempt. The truth is, Jake Ryan says, you wouldn't be class-mobile and ready to hop the first bus into White-Collar World if you were all that happy with your original circumstances. On some level, I'd believed it was wrong to

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want to go. The tug of turf is strong, and anyone who thought of life beyond neighborhood borders was seen as arrogant. “He thinks who he is,” is how the guys put it. What makes you so special? Limited home-boy that I was, I’d only applied to schools in New York City. Why abandon the family? I reasoned. I was accepted by Columbia, but our college advisor thought that it might be too tough a school. “Why not send him to Brooklyn College?” he asked my mother during a parent-teacher conference. “It’s easier.”

“Is your daughter going to Brooklyn?” my mother asked him.

“Well, no,” he said.

All I knew was that Columbia was expensive. New York University, itself a pricey though less prestigious private college in Greenwich Village, had offered me a full, four-year scholarship. Columbia sent me a scholarship package as well, contingent on my maintaining a B-plus average, but they weren’t giving me as much cash. I told my parents I’d go to NYU to save us money, but my mother blanched. When I was in fourth grade, I’d gone to Columbia for a class presentation, and she’d fallen in love with the stone and ivy. “Go to Columbia,” she said. “We’ll figure out the money.”

It wasn’t easy. Recession had damaged the construction industry, making jobs scarce for men like my father. Lots of Straddlers told stories about hard times. Some said they feel guilty as adults, working through their middle-class days with an ease of worry their parents never knew.

Like a lot of tough, blue-collar women, my mother got a job when the economy went south. She went to work in a nearby high school and became part of what I dubbed The Club, a tight circle of blue-collar women who worked as support personnel—the lunch ladies, the school aides, and the attendance mavens. At school, the women would speak of their own precocious sons and daughters with pride and befuddlement. They’d commiserate, watching as each other’s kids moved from acne through divorce, the entire life continuum analyzed in the hallways and offices of a building brimming with other people’s children. School administrations came and went, but the women’s first loyalty was to the kids.

Once during a race riot, the women of The Club waded into the chaos to calm things. Gym teachers were bleeding and deans were getting

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banged around. But my mother touched the kids on their arms, saying, "It's okay," and they began to unclench. The women were a different color, from a different place. But they were mothers comforting children. That's all the kids needed to understand.

During the Vietnam War, my mother and her friend Reenie chased away an Army recruiter who'd come to meet with students. They were relentless, and the guy figured it wasn't worth it and left. Another time, my mom and Reenie screamed at drug dealers who had set up shop in front of the school. Probably armed and generally impervious to intimidation, the young men didn't know what to do. But mothers were yelling at them. So they got in their fancy car and drove off.

When she was a child, my mother was the double Dutch jump rope champ of her block. I picture a taut little girl counting to herself, then hurling herself into the whirl of churning ropes, knowing instinctively when to leap and when to land—never tangled, never tripped. At night, when her body aches, I'm sure she hears the ropes slapping concrete, reminding her that she once had promise and dreams of her own. She never had the chance to fulfill them. But she'd stay awake figuring how her two sons would. Straddlers' parents have such plans for their kids. With strong hopes but scant information, many push their progeny toward the vague realm of Something Better—the glorious middle class. Imbued with these dreams, Straddlers lurch awkwardly out of sheltering enclaves into unknown realms. On their sometimes troubled way, they become educated, and awoken to class differences between the past and their would-be future. Priorities shift. Some values change, while some remain constant. Unlike many they meet in the new, white-collar world, these people are hybrids. That duality is their strength and their struggle, and will comfort and vex them throughout their days.

