

**Western Voices 2013, English 280, Third Place, (Professor, Barbara Ashwood)**

*How I Spent My Summer Vacation*

**Robert True**

It was my very first day of work, about three weeks into summer break. My mom got me a job in the factory where she works. I wasn't very excited; in fact, I was exceptionally nervous. It was like the first day of high school all over again, sweaty palms and all. The miniature digital clock on the dash displayed 4:30 a.m. in its usual green light. The sun was still down and the summer air was still cool as we drove to my 5:00 a.m. shift at the factory. My mom kept her eyes on the road, "Don't forget to report to Roger." I stared out of the passenger window looking at cornfields, "I know," I said. About thirty seconds of silence went by until she repeated herself in the same exact tone she used before, "Don't forget to report to Roger." I looked at her with the annoyed expression that I always give her when she repeats herself, "Yes, Mom, I know. Report to Roger when I get there."

In the distance I could see the immense building. The dullness of its grey color made it stand out against its natural green surroundings, the only sign of human life within 15-miles. Before either of us said anything, we were in front of our destination. "These are the doors you go to for the factory, my office is further up the way.... I'll see you at around 3:00. . .Just call me when you're out." I looked at her with an expressionless face, "Thanks, Mom. See ya then." I quickly got out of the car but slowly walked to the revolving door that I would be going in and out of for the rest of my summer. Some other factory workers were walking over to the factory doors, too. They all looked exhausted, with 5 o'clock shadows, and their facial expressions didn't help either. Every one of them looked miserable to be coming here for work. There was even a guy who was missing an arm and a leg. He had a prosthetic leg so he could walk and so he could continue to work. Most of them looked to be about 40 years old, some even 50 or 60. As soon as I walked through the doors I saw everyone checking in at the desk where a security guard was posted. I looked around apprehensively and turned to the security guard. "Excuse me. I am a temp here and today is my first day." He looked back at me nonchalantly. "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to report to Roger." He nodded. "Wait one se..." The security guard was interrupted by a squeaky old voice that came from behind me, "I'm Roger!" I quickly turned around and saw the man that was missing extremities. I immediately hoped that the look on my face wasn't the expression of surprise. I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable. "Hi, today is my first day and I'm supposed to report to you." I explained. "Ahh yes, you're supposed to assist me in boxing up cables to send out for shipping. Follow me."

As I followed him through the factory, I gazed around at all of the impressive machinery, hearing all of the loud noises that went along with them and wondering if the workers ever got used to the sound. I know I never did. He showed me how to box the cables and label them for shipping. It was easy work, but it was exceptionally boring. I wondered how these people kept their sanity doing this ten hours a day five days a week for twenty straight years, or however long they've been working in this tin can. A monkey could probably do this job if you taught it right.

After packaging and labeling for two straight hours without any real small talk, Roger paused in his work. “What are you studying at school?” he asked with a gentle smile. I continued to work as I answered, “Biology... Well, specifically zoology.” He started working again, putting the shipping label on the box he just finished packing. “Biology is a very interesting field,” he said in his soft squeaky voice. “You should have no trouble finding a job.” “Well, that’s what I’m hoping for,” I said loudly so that he could hear me over the machinery. As we were having this conversation, the factory was busy with people everywhere performing the same duties they have been doing since they’ve been working here. It looked busier than a colony of ants, with people and forklifts running all over the place. Everybody seemed to be in a hurry, but the only thing I was in a hurry for was getting out at 3:00 p.m. “But recently I’ve been thinking about not going back to school next fall. Not really sure if I’m college material,” I said. His facial expression changed from joy to dismay, the kind of expression you saw on your grandfather’s face after you’ve caused mischief as a child. “That would be unwise of you, Junior.” I was certainly expecting him to give me a lecture on why I should stay in school; after all, that’s what everybody else did. “You don’t want to work at place like this the rest of your life, do you?” At this point, we were both doing our work at a snail’s pace, looking unusual as everyone else around us was operating fast and steady. “Well, no, but. . .” He cut me off before I could finish my explanation. “I started working here when I was 24 years old. Guess how old I am now?” I just stared at him and stayed quiet. “I am 61 years old, and I’ll probably be working here till I die, cuz I sure as hell can’t retire, Junior.” I continued to look at him and noticed that he had to work slowly because of his disability, not because he was deep into conversation. Roger was aware that I was curious, and to him it was an appropriate time to tell the tale. “The reason I’m missing an arm and a leg is because I was working on one of those cable machines over there,” pointing at a monstrous machine that fed cable onto a giant spool, “and my arm and leg got caught in the lift mechanism and ripped them clean off. Was out of work for quite some time, Kid, but as you see I’m right back here still trying to pay off some of the medical bills. I know, its ironic, right?” I was speechless. I’ve never in my life heard of something so tragic. I had a look of concern and sorrow on my teenage face. He noticed—and chuckled, “That’s why you should stay in school. Get a job doing something you like to do.”

I stayed quiet for a while after that, thinking about what Roger said to me and realizing that everyone who told me to finish college was right. The ten-hour shift was brutal. The work was mindless, repetitive, and tiring—mentally, not physically. I felt worn out. Now I understood why the workers all looked so miserable coming back here. It was 90 degrees outside and there was no air conditioning in this metal box. My body was soaking wet from the sweat. The whole factory had a disgusting musty smell, and the air was humid too. This whole job was just wrong for me.

When the day finally reached 3:00 p.m. all the workers rushed outside after clocking out, it was a great feeling. Feeling the scorching summer rays hit my body as I walked out of the revolving doors felt so much better than I thought it would. I felt like a vampire being dragged out of that dark factory and thrown outside to sizzle in the sunlight. I saw my mom waiting in the car for me. As soon as I got in she asked, “How was your day?” I looked at her with a gentle smile and said, “You know what, Mom? It was actually really good. I realized a lot. I’ve decided that I’m going back to school this fall.”

A note on process from Robert: I chose to write my essay about the summer I worked in a factory because it really opened my eyes to the benefit of having a college education. While growing up, people (especially my parents) always told me it was important to go to college. I knew having a college degree helped in getting hired; but I never knew how essential it was when you wanted to choose your career. The people I met when working at the factory really shed some light on how unhappy they were about not furthering their educations. The experience I had working that summer really had a strong impact on me, and I hope to share the experience with anyone who reads my essay.