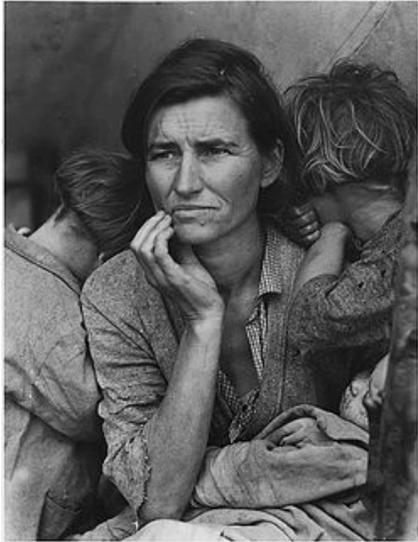


The Hooverville Blues



Jackson Ranger

English 1H

Mr. O'Brein

Short Story

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Jagged and gleaming, the shards of the shop's pulverised window pane crunched under the steel toed workboots of an exhausted stonemason whose face wore the pain of a nation in chaos. In his thickly gloved hands he grasped the thin neck of a bottle of a murky brown liquid containing an unknown amount of alcohol. As he rounded the street corner leaning on the rough brick wall his eyes locked upon the immense cluster of hurriedly thrown together shelters of drift wood, scrap metal, and collections of various stones sloppily pasted together with old soup can labels and half empty containers of school glue. The man, reeking of unwashed squalor, managed to muster a small scoff at what had become of the great capitalist west before falling to his knees and releasing a terrible hacking cough combined with a mixture of sanguine and saliva.

Jumping back from the debilitated man spewing bodily fluids across the ground and over his tattered sneakers, Connor Williams, one of the only employed men in the makeshift ghetto city, walked briskly away from the alcoholic toward his dimly lit substitute cardboard home. Pushing the stained sweatshirt used as a door out of the way, he set down his bag, abundant with cheap junk food. His two young daughters were sound asleep on the cold ground, cushioned by scavenged articles of tattered clothing. Connor knelt down next to his eldest daughter of eleven, stroking her long dark brown hair and kissing her once on her pale forehead. As he stood up and moved to the corner of the hut, searching for his only other set of clothing, his wife of fourteen years crept quietly through the substitute door grasping a soup can filled to the brim

with muddy brown water collected from puddles generated by the former night's rain. She set the water down next to a small collection of twigs and newspaper scraps intended to be used to in some way purify the mixture of water, organisms, and sewage. Turning away from the cardboard wall, Connor noticed that she was grasping her side as she grated a tiny piece of steel against a vastly larger piece of flint. Connor, realizing something wasn't quite right, swiftly and quietly moved to his wife. He took the tools from her hands and placed them on the cool dirt floor. Looking up from her hands, now empty, Jeanne Williams let out a gasp of pain masked as an exasperated sigh.

Giving a sarcastic smirk Connor questioned “Oh, you really think after fourteen years and two kids I can’t tell when you're trying to be too tough for your own good?”.

Managing to give a quick smile before reverting to a grimace, Jeanne responded “No really, I’m fine. It's just a little cut.” As she attempted to rise to her feet, a sharp pain shot up her back and forced her back to the ground. Connor, quick on his feet, caught her before she could hit the solid dirt floor, which was spotted with sharp pebbles. He lowered her slowly to the ground.

Squatting down next to her, Connor said, “Come on now, show me this little cut of yours.” Jeanne, in terrible anguish but being too brave to show it, lifted up the right side of her slightly torn t-shirt, exposing a deep gash pock marked with miniscule pieces of metal and rock, and surrounded by an inflamed and swollen scarlet area. Connor, not expecting the extent of her injury, recoiled and in genuine consternation, and asked with perturbation in his voice, “Jesus Christ Jeanne, when did you get this battle wound?”.

Struggling to form words amidst the renewed leaking of blood, Jeanne was able only to say a short explanation before recoiling as Connor lightly brushed the infected area with his pant leg. She replied, "I was looking for some new pieces of cloth to close up that hole in the right corner, and got my shirt cut on a rusty old fence." Connor, now seeing the possibility of a more extensive infection, rummaged through his satchel, which was filled with random strange items found while walking to and from the GM manufacturing plant where he worked six days a week, thirteen hours a day. Finding what he was searching for, a small mostly used tube of antibiotic ointment he had found in an overflowing dumpster, he returned to his ailing wife, whose eyes were squeezed tightly shut. Without warning he spread the frigid ointment across the area. Jeanne, pale white and reeling in pain, shuddered and allowed herself only a faint squeak. She glancing down at her younger daughter of six, who began to stir amidst the commotion. Connor, moving as fast as he could without creating too much noise, returned to the satchel seeking a bandage of some sort. Finding a roll of stained gauze, he left back to Jeanne's side and began wrapping the thick material around her torso.

Connor, hopeful that the antibiotic would work to stifle the spread of a possible case of tetanus, lay back on his cloth and twine bed. Turning his head to his exhausted wife, he said, "You know today on the way to work, I saw protesters blocking the main entrance, so I had to go around to the back." Pausing for a moment to collect his swirling mind, he added, "I think they were Communists or something. They were yelling and screaming about exploitation, and equality, and some other crazy nonsense." Laughing a bit, he turned to Jeanne, who although uncomfortable was finding it less painful to lie down than stand, did not respond. She only made a face of deep thought and contemplation. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

Jeanne, turning over to face Connor with great difficulty, responded, “Is it really that radical to ask for a bit more pay, and maybe some more good jobs here instead of in China?”

Connor, clearly taken aback by this, refuted her idea by saying, “But that's Communism Jeanne. The founding fathers wanted us to be a free market, where everyone has to pick themselves up by the bootstraps to succeed, not a nanny state that hands out free education and food to lazy people.” Annoyed and tired he rolled over struggling to find rest in his restless world.

Connor sipped the warm mixture of sugar, coffee, and dirt filtered water cold, and sluggish. It was hours before the sun would rise, and longer before anyone else in the ghetto would bother to get up. But Connor had a long trek ahead of him. The factory was ten miles from where he sat, and with no car or money to take a bus, he was forced to walk the distance every morning. Forcing the last drop of the concoction down his throat, he picked up his heavy satchel and emerged into the sour morning air. Most days pollution fogged the skies of Detroit, but today it lay over the streets like a thick cream obscuring Connors vision. He kept one of his arms outstretched, cutting through the dense smog. The air scorched his throat as he dodged discarded bottles and empty beer boxes, abruptly emerging from the gray haze of noxious fumes. Droplets of water formed in the corners of Connor’s eyes as he rounded the final street corners, approaching the factory where the familiar roar of tired and angry people filled his ears.

The crowd of protesters had seemed to diminish in size over the past couple of weeks, as the depression dragged on. These disillusioned workers, who had for years spent their sweat and blood building up GM's automotive empire, were thrown out like useless detritus as the company's shareholders became ancy amidst falling stock prices. But to Connor they were lazy, butthurt, less than him. Connor was one of the last blue collar workers in America that had not lost all confidence in the economic system, and the Orwellian administration that occupied the executive mansion. He kept his head down and made his way around the massive structure of concrete and steel that housed hundreds of empty workstations and slowly progressing car bodies. He pushed through the thick iron door and entered the blazing hot factory floor. Connor turned the dial on his heavy steel locker, exposing the red safety helmet and gloves that occupied its innards. As he walked across the expansive assembly line, weaving through workstations and tool benches to reach his assigned area, a raspy voice emanated from behind him.

“ ‘ey Williams, the hell are you doing showin’ up here late!” said Samuel Wells, the lanky corporate oversight manager.

“ Oh... sorry sir, I was just running a bit late, and the eh.... protesters were in the way, sorry,” Connor said timidly knowing that Wells was responsible for layoffs.

“ Ya sure Williams, that's a bullshit excuse, but you are the most productive one left so you get a pass. Next time I won't be so generous,” he said sneeringly. Connor, understandably perturbed, rushed to his work station, pulled on his tight gloves, and got to work. He installed tiny metal parts in massive engines that rolled slowly past his workstation on a tautly pulled rubber conveyor belt. Outside the factory, the crowd began to disperse as the hours dragged on with no real response from inside. Connor's arms burned with fatigue as the engines kept rolling

through his workstation hour after grueling hour. He struggled to keep his eyes open as he sloppily installed parts. As he blindly reached behind him for another piston ring, the conveyor belt, which had not been inspected since the beginning of the depression, let out a terrible screech. The support beams under the system collapsed, dropping a two-ton, internal combustion engine onto Connor's knee cap, instantaneously shattering and folding his leg bone like a piece of paper left in the rain. At the moment it happened, the pain didn't fully register in his mind. Silently, lifelessly, Connor collapsed onto the cold factory floor. The concussive impact sent orange splinters of his work helmet flying in all directions, and the sudden darkness welcomed him into oblivion.

Connor passed in and out of consciousness throughout the journey from the factory floor to the rigid operating table. Red and blue lights were seared into his mind as his head pounded with the shooting pain from his deflated leg. The last memory before he lost all awareness was the tight respiratory mask placed over his mouth, and the sudden prick of an I.V.

Connor stared in disbelief at the piece of artificially plain paper dotted with droplets of ink, coagulated to form characters. The amount named on the sheet was thirty five thousand dollars, more money than he had ever possessed in his life. Connor was too poor to pay for health insurance for himself, or the rest of his family for that matter, he and certainly lacked the credit to take a loan. With no possible way to pay of the outlandish cost of his multiple surgeries, Connor was given a single crutch, a period of sixty days to pay off the cost before he would be brought to court.

Connor limped his way down the street, following old rusted street signs and street lamps that cut through the haze. It took him seven hours of intense concentration and effort to finally reach the overflowing ghetto. Fumbling with the old wooden crutch that was too tall for his shoulder, he managed to poke his head through the door flap before falling to the dirt floor. His nose emitting a terrible crack as it broke against the rock covered floor. Holding his lopsided nose, and attempting to contain the blood, Connor rummaged through the the substitute cloth storage units, finding the old roll of gauze. He took a swath and a piece of duct tape and pulled hard on his nose. The cartilage cracked as he moved it back into place. As he sat there catching his breath and staring down at his heavy brace, Connor realized two things. Neither Jeanne nor his two children were in the hut even though by it was late at night, and an opened envelope lay on top of his returned satchel. The envelope contained a check for one hundred fifty dollars and a notice of his immediate termination of employment at General Motors Detroit division. Connor was numb with pain, confusion, and anxiety. His mind raced as he scrambled to the door looking up and down the narrow gap between shelters, expecting some sign of his wife or children. He found none. Connor, helpless to move at more than a snail's pace, understood that there was nothing he could practically do at the moment. Worriedly, lethargically, Connor sat back on his piled up groupings of newspaper stuffed socks struggling to find rest.

The cigarette illuminated the night air, filling the emptiness with an asphyxiating aroma.

Jeanne stood under the street lamp courting cars and bicycles alike. It had been two weeks since Connor disappeared, the only indication of what had happened was the letter regarding his

employment status and a customary check as severance. Amidst the confusion her infection had grown, expanding the length of her right arm. Any contact with the origin of her unknown affliction caused excruciating pain. The constant fever and horrific migraine fueled her emotionally charged decision to leave her two young daughters on the steps of the overflowing local orphanage. She could not stand to witness her children's suffering amidst her inability to provide for them, and her transition to the more shady side of Detroit nightlife. The high beams seared her eyes as the car stopped. Jeanne, taking in a deep breath, stepped into the Honda Civic, somberly.

Day after day passed by without any appearance of familiar faces. Connor wasted away under the hot midday sun and amidst the frigid nights, teetering on the edge of psychopathy. When it became entirely evident of his isolation, Connor ran the cool body of an old brass key through his fingers, pushing it in and turning it to unlock the ornate oak box given to him by his father. Originally its contents consisted of pebbles and volcanic ash collected from far off beaches in a reality no longer recognizable. However, worried by crowded conditions of the ghettos, prone to crime, and filled with questionable figures Connor procured, through less than legal means, a semi automatic glock-18. The sleek black steel presented the easiest solution to Connor's conflicted psyche. Connor put the gun in his pocket and rummaged through his satchel, wrapping his rough hands around the clear glass bottle's neck.

Tired and lackadaisical, Jeanne pushed aside the tattered sweatshirt, expecting nothing more than the emptiness she had become accustomed to. Instead she found a demoralized man huddled in the corner of the collapsing lean-to, caressing a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels. Ecstatically, Jeanne moved to greet her re-emerged husband. Nearing his side, oblivious to the world, she felt a ripping sensation and a rush of cold liquid across her face as the bottle hit its mark, sending her sputtering to the ground.

“The fuck have you been for four straight days.” Connor slurred through his growing stubble. His vision blurred and his motion impeded, Connor ripped the stained paper from his coat pocket throwing it down over her lifeless body. “How in the hell ‘m I supposed to pay this, I don't have a dollar to my name and they're asking for thirty five thousand of ‘em!” he blabbered. Tears streaming down his rough, edged face, Connor pulled the loaded handgun from his pocket and trained on the back of his wife’s head. Connor’s hand violently tremored as he edged his finger closer to the trigger. The sweat sliding down from his furrowed brow blinded his vision of the physical world and emancipated him from his metaphysical reality. With all his reservations abolished by inebriation and absolute disillusioned euphoria, his finger steadied and effortlessly discharged the firearm and his best friend. With the burden of a living heir to his enslavement to unconquerable debt lifted, Connor stuck the pistol in his mouth and stared blankly through a crack in sweatshirt door. A ray of sunlight forced it’s way through the opening, illuminating the crimson trail drawn in the dirt floor. The trigger cleanly slid from its idle position to the point of discharge and emptiness.

The sun rose and set, day after day, the depression ravaged all it touched. Arrogance, ignorance, and unwavering allegiance to the ideas and structures that separated their aristocracy

from the lowly plebeian classes destroyed any ability to realize the pain of a decimated population. Connor Williams' body is but one forgotten grain of sand laid to rest below the precipice of history.