

I am the third illegitimate son of a convenience store clerk and an often out-of-work secretary, and a second generation ward of the state. Until I was an adult, I lived mostly by the kindness of strangers. Growing up, we stayed in abandoned houses, ate at soup kitchens, and the only stability I had was when I was in foster homes. My parents used my brothers and I as pawns in wars over child support, and were the kings and queens of “pay first and last month and wait till they evict us/shut off power.” The last time, I was eight and got off the school bus to all our stuff thrown in the front yard of our apartment complex. After this, I went to live in a children’s home, where I stayed till I was 18.

I have no illusions about my parents. My mother was ten years older than my father, and just out of a marriage where she lost custody of three children I have never met. Her and my father started hooking up, and she got pregnant with my eldest brother. Two more kids followed at eighteen month intervals. My father clearly tried to end this relationship with my mother, and went on to actually marry a woman who already had two kids and to raise those as his own. He dated this woman the same time my brothers and I were living in an abandoned house, cooking meals on the heating vent since we had no power, and walking half a mile to a gas station with five gallon buckets to get water to bathe. My mother died when I was in college, and I have spoken to my father only once in nearly 20 years. I have no desire to speak to him at all.

I am telling this story because I hate to tell this story. I’m not embarrassed by it, for I don’t consider my parents’ failings my own. I hate telling it because when I do people want to pity me, ask me “was it hard growing up that way,” and so forth. I understand the sentiment, and if my story were anyone else’s I’d be impressed.

Here’s the truth though: it was just the way I was raised. I didn’t really know any different. There are those who want to blame their past for why they became a fuck up, or whatever; indeed, when I look at some of my worst my behavior, I see clear examples of how this upbringing shaped multiple aspects of my personality. Overall, I’ve done better than some, worse than others, and seem to blend in well-enough with polite society. Indeed, most people would never guess, and are sometimes surprised when I tell them, that I have long felt like an insecure outsider who had to perpetually fight for his independence, and even now often feel awkward in social situations. I have long worried that people would ask “why is this guy here” and make me leave.

Last Christmas, I finally realized that somewhere along the line I had “made it.” I wasn’t that outsider anymore. Somehow, I had managed to become parts of many social groups with many friends. I wasn’t the outsider intellectual; I teach at a major university. I wasn’t the poor five year old pumping gas for money; all my bills were paid and I had a fridge of food. At first, I worried that with this realization, I would lose my drive, and only over time saw that being pulled by curiosity is as powerful a force as being pushed by fear of poverty. I also realized that I didn’t really know how to behave as this person I had become. The strategies that had worked to get me where I am are often detrimental to staying there. For the past six months, I have been working on myself, and it has been some of the most productive and time well-wasted periods of my life. So, I write this now partially as apology to those I know I have offended along the way, partially in gratitude at it only taking 20 years to overcome the disappointments of the first 20, and partially to encourage my fellow travelers to talk about these types of issues. Sometimes I wonder if it would have taken me so long if I had felt that I wasn’t the only one. To my fellow travelers, I just want to say there is at least one person who understands.

16 July 2013