

Chapter One

September 2011

“I want everyone at this party drinking, dancing, and having a good time!”

Thomas had started his first year of college at the University of Eastern Indiana just a week ago, and he felt his heartbeat significantly increase as he entered the melee, not sure if he could deliver on the order shouted by the well-built, muscular man standing by the keg. Fortunately, he hadn't had any disputes yet with Sean, his roommate, which had been one of his biggest worries. Thomas was grateful that Sean was unfazed by his trepidation about going to his first college party. Sean had heard about this frat party from someone in his Economics 101 lecture, and since Thomas had no other plans that evening, they went over together. Drinking was officially illegal, but this rule was routinely ignored in the tradition of most college campuses.

Thomas had felt very peaceful in the library earlier in the day, slowly processing his thoughts and letting his mind wander. Here, there were hordes of people. It was very crowded and hard to move around. Instead of trying to push through them all, Thomas made an effort to focus on his surroundings; he'd never been in a real frat house before and he didn't know what to expect. The main room was made of brick. But he couldn't see any brick, as the walls were well masked by the crowd. For Thomas, the ideal physical environment involved a lot of empty space with possibly a small crowd in the room to fill in some of the gaps. This room did not fit the bill; it felt a lot more as if he were incarcerated or being intellectually suffocated.

Thomas was never one to engage in a lot of small talk, and the large amount of background noise further exacerbated this tendency. The frat boys holding court in the center of the room were particularly loud, attempting to prove that they had the most testosterone at the party. Thomas wondered if they were on steroids or were just naturally that obnoxious. Pass around those steroids that you have, Thomas thought. Maybe I wouldn't feel so overwhelmed here if I took whatever you dudes are on at the moment. He turned to express these thoughts to Sean, but Sean wasn't there. He'd gotten lost in the crowd, possibly, or had gone searching for a drink. Thomas was rooted to the spot, feeling it was safer to stay in one place and let Sean come back to find him rather than venturing further into the pulsing crowd. After about twenty minutes of standing around and listening to the cacophonous shouting of a room full of college kids starting to get intoxicated, Thomas felt that it was probably best to head home. What am I really going to accomplish here tonight? he thought, regretting that he had let Sean persuade him to come along. Standing up on his toes, Thomas surveyed the room to find Sean. His roommate was involved in what looked like an intense game of beer pong, fitting in seamlessly with the party. Thomas took a breath and dove into the crowd, elbowing his way towards the drinking game.

“Sean,” Thomas said, reaching out to tap his roommate on the shoulder, “I'm going to head back to the dorm. I'm not really enjoying myself here.”

“Okay, man. I think you're missing out on a lot of fun, but do as you wish,” Sean replied, barely taking his eyes off the cups lined up on the long table.

Once again that week, Thomas mused about how different this reality was from the images that he dreamed of during the summer before starting college. He had imagined sitting around in his dormitory, having fabulous conversations with intellectual soul mates. Is this what college was really about? He had heard that college was “the best four years of your life”, but if shouting and getting wasted were going to be the best four years of his life, then what kind of purgatory was he about to enter after he finished college?

He was taking a seminar in Early American History and had high hopes for it since the class was small with only about twenty other students. Therefore, the possibility existed for student participation instead of the professor merely lecturing to a large auditorium, filled with silent students. They’d only had one class so far, but on that first day, the professor caught Thomas’s attention with a series of broad questions to the students. “Why do we study history?” was the first. For Thomas, who was deeply studious, this question caused a surge of adrenaline. However, stunned silence came over the rest of the room. He could think of a well-thought-out answer, but before he had a chance to raise his hand, one girl in the front of the room answered, “So that we don’t become Communists like the rest of the world.” Thomas had to hold back a laugh. To protect us against Communism? Communism was almost completely gone. What was this girl taught in high school? Another guy called out that he didn’t know or care; he was taking this course as an elective towards his sports management degree. With a large smirk on his face, he added, “I’d rather be playing golf if it were up to me.”

Thomas did have some desire to chuckle at the responses. However, it was also quite disheartening that these students had so little knowledge of history or appreciation for it. This was not merely a droll situation; it was also a dark sea. He wondered if the golfer student ever thought about anything more serious than sports. Entering his naturally pensive state of mind, he thought, Yes, this man exists. He physically exists, and playing golf can be quite enjoyable. But Thomas thought that there should be something deeper to existence beyond playing a physical sport. That golfer is an American on his passport. Yet he has no thoughts about what it means to be an American. He didn’t have to earn that citizenship. It was automatically given to him merely for being born, and he wastes that opportunity with a superficial, thoughtless existence.

It then occurred to Thomas that maybe it wasn’t so much that the golfer was a person of questionable character. After all, he seemed good-natured enough. Thomas, with his bookishness and penchant for sophisticated humor, was the black sheep in his family of anti-intellectual, heartland folk. However, possibly this golfer would have fit into his family quite well. Maybe he just has had very limited life experiences, and these experiences have never forced him to consider serious, deeper questions. I would like to get another opinion about this, and I don’t know anyone else here yet besides Sean. I am not one to initiate serious conversations with strangers. I will ask Sean what he thinks about this.

In a very glum state of mind, he remarked, “Sean, I’m the only person in my history seminar who seems to have any appreciation for history.”

“Appreciation for history? What does that mean, bro? Did you have a few beers at a party tonight that you haven’t mentioned?” Sean replied, laughing heartily.

A look of irritation flashed across Thomas's face. "No, smartass, I didn't have any beers tonight. But I do sometimes wish that nasty-tasting beer would come out of the showers of people who lack appreciation for history. It would serve them right for their blinders. Poetic justice."

Sean looked quite confused by the comment. He paused for a minute, looking like he was trying to figure out what Thomas had meant. Finally, he just shrugged and said, "Okay, dude, I have no idea what you're talking about. Maybe you smoked something tonight much stronger than beer?"

"I have to deny your allegations," Thomas said with a sigh, sitting down on his twin bed covered with the new comforter his mother had bought for him before he left for school. "I do, however, plead guilty to feeling alienated in my history class. I think that history is a fascinating subject, yet one girl in my class thinks that the only reason that we should study history is so that we don't all become Communists. Yes, in the year two thousand fucking eleven, the world is in danger of being overrun by Communism! I've never seen a more astute awareness of the historical context of the early twenty-first century. Another guy who spoke in class today said that he's only taking this class because he needs an elective for his sports management degree, and he would rather be playing golf."

Thomas flopped down on his pillow and closed his eyes, wishing that he'd considered the possibility of attending other schools that were further away from home. He was the first person in his family to go to college. During his final year of high school, the thought of embarking on something so unfamiliar and more than an hour from his native surroundings had seemed simply too terrifying. I could have researched this more thoroughly. As they say, you snooze, you lose.

"Well guess what, bro, I'd rather be playing golf any day of the week than sitting in a history class. That's why I'm a communications major. That dude and I should have a beer and hang out at the next party. He'd probably stay and have a good time, unlike you who pussied out after thirty minutes." Sean said that last part with more derision than Thomas had been expecting, but at this moment, Thomas was indifferent.

Thomas rose up from the bed and paced back and forth, lightly rolling his eyes. "So elaborate on that point, Sean," he said, ignoring Sean's insult. "Why would you rather play golf than learn about history?"

"Dude, playing golf is fun. History is about as much fun as getting a root canal," Sean replied.

"Do you by chance get hammered before getting a root canal? Where did you go for the last pre-root canal happy hour?"

Now Sean looked even more confused. "I've actually never had a root canal, dude, but it would definitely suck to be sober for it."

"They give you an anesthetic, believe it or not. There are other alternatives besides booze for avoiding a full-blown root canal experience. But anyways, back to my original question. Why do you think that history is painfully boring?" Thomas asked.

“Because who cares what happened in the past? I want to have fun right now, and playing golf sounds like a ton of fun on a nice day, bro,” Sean said.

“Would you say the same thing about your own life? Everything that happened in your own life up until today: does it have any meaning or importance?”

“Sure, but what does this have to do with history?” Sean asked.

“Your life is history at the micro level. If history at the micro level is important, then it seems reasonable to believe that history at the macro level would be important as well,” Thomas said, looking away at the wall. He attempted to remain unruffled, even though it was demoralizing to hear more anti-history viewpoints at his university.

Sean shook his head a full three times before speaking. “I’m getting pretty exhausted from this conversation, Thomas. I’m here at college to have a good time and get my degree so that I can get a job when I finish and pay my own bills. You seem harmless enough, but if you want to sit around having these pointless conversations, then you need to find a different crowd. Cool?”

“Well, Sean, I hope that someday you change your mind. It isn’t going to happen tonight though; I can see that.”

Thomas really wished that Sean was an anomaly at his school, but he wasn’t. Thomas himself was the anomaly. He was one of the only people on campus who saw the value of learning as an end in itself. For just about everyone else, they saw their college classes in the exact same light as Sean: simply a ticket to a job, and nothing more.

His experience in high school had been quite similar. Almost no other classmates enjoyed having the kind of probing conversations that fascinated him. They usually reacted in a similar manner as Sean had. Thomas had been hoping that college, that supposed ideal four years of life, was going to be different. Here he would find others to explore ideas with. Intellectual conversations would be robust dialogues with other people, not merely him talking to a nicely painted wall. Instead, it looked like his college years were just going to be the next exit on the same boring highway.

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Three years later, Thomas was now a senior at the University of Eastern Indiana. He no longer had a roommate to argue with; seniors were able to get single rooms quite easily. Most of his fellow seniors had moved into apartments where they could drink and party more easily and avoid the Communists who might try and knock on their doors and convert them.

Most of his classmates were starting to talk about looking for jobs, or at least general career planning. It was easiest to look for a job in the surrounding area. Certainly that was one option, but he was yearning for a change. His college experience had mirrored his high school experience: lonely, isolated, and alienated. In this part of the United States that he had experienced, he was a square peg in a round hole. His family had never left the state due to lack of interest and tight budgets. He didn’t know if the rest of

America was different from where he had grown up. Although his college classes had not helped in this regard, they had, nonetheless, expanded his worldview.

That day, while studying in the library, he pondered serious thoughts about expanding his horizons and traveling overseas after graduation. On the bright side, his college classes had given him a greater theoretical awareness about lands beyond American borders, but Thomas strongly preferred to have real, tactile experiences of these places. Showing would be far more meaningful than telling. He knew that France historically had a café culture where people actually did sit in cafés and have the types of discussions that Thomas liked. He also knew that India was a deeply spiritual place; it sounded like a society where getting the next big car or large television wasn't everyone's first priority. He still remembered his professor lecturing about people bathing in the holy Ganges River; this gave him a lot of food for thought. Sure, many of his classmates were hypocritical Christians who prayed at church and then drank heavily and cheated on their significant others. But the Hindus who bathed in that Ganges River sounded more sincere to him. Possibly they truly believed in the teachings of their religion? Possibly they took spirituality and the soul as serious ideas to heart? He wanted to talk to these people who bathed in the Ganges. He thought that he would probably learn more from talking to these people than his college classmates, and they would definitely be more rewarding company.

None of this was absolutely certain. However, Thomas did know for sure that he was unhappy in rural Indiana. He was hoping that there was a paradise somewhere on earth. Was France his paradise? What about Japan, where a lot of his electronics came from? He had learned that Japan was full of Shinto shrines. Surely there was somewhere where he would not feel alienated and life might approach bliss? He didn't know exactly where this place was, but French cafés, Indian spirituality, and Japanese shrines all sounded immensely appealing, and extremely far away from Indiana.

I am not staying here for the rest of my life. He could do that, and have a modern-day version of Dante's Inferno. Or he could find a different experience that would open up his mind to different ideas, different cultures, and at a minimum, different surroundings. Just because college had been a major disappointment did not justify feeling completely forlorn about the future. Many famous people have recovered from setbacks, Thomas thought. He remembered that Einstein had difficulty obtaining a teaching post before he went to graduate school. I may not be Einstein. I may not even be as talented as the founders of Einstein Brothers' Bagels. Doc Brown's dog Einstein in Back to the Future had resolve though, and so will I.

The next day, after class, Thomas went over to the Office of International Programs, headed by Dr. Dick Cheesemeister. Interesting last name, Thomas thought. He may wind up steering me towards France with that name. The office was filled with books about different countries from all over the world; some of them he had never heard of before, such as Burma and Kazakhstan. He saw materials about work opportunities abroad in Suriname. Yes, people in Eastern Indiana must be lining up to go to Suriname, Thomas thought with a smirk. Hell, I've never heard of it and I'm probably one of the few people on this campus who has even visited this office. Maybe if they bribe some of my classmates with a few kegs of beer and some porn magazines, they'd think about working there for a while.

After a few minutes, a tall blonde girl came up to him and asked him if he needed any help. Thomas was startled. He'd been so immersed in the books on the shelf that he hadn't heard her enter.

"Yes, I want to work abroad after I graduate. I need to experience something else besides rural Indiana," he said, turning to face her.

The girl smiled, just barely. "What is your major here?"

"History, with a minor in straightforward irony," he said.

She did not find his wry humor endearing. Instead, her vibe reminded him of Mr. Keating in Dead Poets Society slamming his hand on the bell and replying, "Thank you for playing." She gave a little annoyed huff before answering, "Well, there might not be a lot of programs where you can directly use your major. Are you just looking for any kind of work experience?"

"Yes, I think that will serve my purposes. Where is the information on France?"

"The European programs are around the back wall by that green plant. We have a lot of programs in Europe. I am confident that you will find something to your liking," she said flatly.

Thomas thanked the girl, who had already disappeared again, for her help and headed over to the European section. In one binder, he saw a decent-sized listing of programs in France. One of them involved child-care work. He wasn't going to do that. He found the noisy, rowdy behavior of young children very annoying. Another one was to be an agricultural volunteer working for a small stipend; that didn't appeal to him either. He thought it would be too exhausting working on a farm, and he didn't want to be in yet another rustic setting. He preferred more of a contrast to his environment in Indiana, so an urban experience would be more suitable. Then he came across one program that permitted foreigners to work in French hotels for a few months. Temporary visas were available, and the program was operating in several French cities. He felt a small spark light up inside. I will get to experience urban life and I think that I can tolerate hotel work for a few months. He copied down the important contact information and walked back to his room, in high spirits and much more optimistic than he had been during the last few years. That evening, he filled out the paperwork to obtain a passport and completed the application to the program.