CHAPTER 6

YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN

“Perhaps this is our strange and haunting paradox in America--that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement. At any rate, this is how it seemed to young George Webber, who was never so assured of his purpose as when he was going somewhere on a train. And he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began” – Thomas Wolfe

In Curtis Sittenfeld’s novel Prep, a young White woman attends “Ault,” a prestigious preparatory school, on scholarship. It is not until she is interviewed by the rather nosy Angie Varizi, herself a former working-class college student, that Lee opens up about her experiences. These include shame over her origins, envy of fellow students’ material possessions and cultural capital, and confusion about her own place on campus. Near the end of the interview, Angie asks Lee, “Do you feel different from your family when you go back home?” Lee responds, “It would be depressing if I did, right?” She then proceeds to describe how her decision to come to Ault was in large part an attempt to distance herself from what she distressingly considered her low-brow family. She describes a family vacation to Tampa Bay, Florida, where she saw an expensive new housing development full of houses with “bay windows and porches with rocking chairs on them and big green lawns and palm trees.” Ten years old at the time, Lee told her father they should buy such a house. Her father replied, “Lee, people like us don’t live in those houses. These people keep their money in Swiss bank accounts. They eat caviar for dinner. They send their sons to boarding school.” - “Do they send their daughters to boarding school?” she replies. Her commitment to be the type of person who could buy one of those houses led her to choose Ault and to pursue a scholarship, over the concerns of her parents, who could not understand why their teen-age daughter would want to leave their comfortable Midwest home to attend a boarding school a thousand miles away. Throughout the novel, Sittenfeld reminds the reader of the psychic costs of Lee’s decision. She may be on the way to the Ivy League, but she has been wrenched away from the family she knew (that it is by choice does not make it any less wrenching) in order to do so.

Many hundreds who have made the journey from working-class home to college have recounted similar stories. Thomas Wolfe told the story in his semi-autobiographical masterpiece Look Homeward, Angel, the somewhat sequel of which has given us the well-known reminder that “we can’t go home again.” Those who have made the journey have talked about the desire to “get out” of the place
they were born and raised – whether this be an urban ghetto, a small city in the Midwest, or a rural town in the South. They have described the shame they felt over their class of origin, masquerading at college as something other than who they had been before, refusing to disclose what their parents did for a living, remaining silent during conversations about childhood adventures and family vacations. Even those who are proud of their parents, grateful for the care and nurturing their families have provided them, loyal to the very concept of family and community, report finding it difficult to return home after going to college. A great chasm of difference and distinctions seems to yawn between the working-class college student and her home and family, and although it only widens as the years away at school accumulate, students are aware of this chasm the very first time they return home, be it for Thanksgiving, Winter Break, or the very first weekend of college.

To some extent, all college students go through alterations while at school. This is part of what it means to grow up and one of the values of a post-secondary education. But what working-class students feel is a fundamental separation and alienation from their working-class roots. After all, they are now on a path whose entire goal is to set them apart from their families and communities. Going to college has been a way to "get out", to "move up" and "away" from the past. So how does it feel to return to that past during school breaks? How does the working-class college student communicate with his brothers and sisters and parents about what he is studying at school, or what his future plans might be, if those plans are completely beyond the experience of his family members? How do working-class college students adjust to the relative deprivation (materially, culturally) of their homes, compared to what they have seen and experienced at college?

Over time, many find it easier to accept the old adage about not being able to go home again and simply stop returning. Irvin Peckham, a working-class academic (one who acknowledges his working-class roots while currently holding a position as a college professor) has called this process erasure. He writes,

A few of us manage to break with our origins, denying our ‘incorrectness’ or the ‘incorrect; class into which we were born. I do not know how others manage the break but I erased my incorrectness by infrequently going home. In time, I more or less forgot who my parents and siblings were. Although I hesitate to admit it, I have to tell you that the only time my parents and I and my brother and my sister have all been together since I left home was for my parents’ silver wedding anniversary. I suspect the next occasion will be a funeral. That’s called erasure."

Alfred Lubrano, the son of a Brooklyn brickmaker, currently an award-winning Philadelphia journalist, has described the pressures that formerly working-class people experience in his 2003 book Limbo. Lubrano describes not only his own