



Northeast. By the late 1960s the former mills largely stood abandoned or had become factories where cheap costume jewelry was produced. A few others housed companies like School House Candy.

Working there was a rite of passage, an initiation into the world of work. From School House Candy one could move up to being a stringer, carder, or foot-press operator at one of the jewelry factories. My friends and my oldest sister described the scene to me. Down an endlessly turning conveyor belt would flow a river of one type of candy, perhaps lemon yellow lollipops—yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops. You stared at those yellow lollipops and thought you could never in your life be as sick of anything as you were of the sight of yellow lollipops. And then you would see that the yellow lollipops had been replaced by red lollipops. At first there would be relief. Something different to look at! And then, after a few minutes of watching red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops coming down the conveyor belt, you would find yourself longing to see something else, anything else—even a yellow lollipop.

Sometimes what came along the conveyor belt were Easter chicks, made of white marshmallow coated in yellow, three of which were to be placed on a white card and then sent on down the belt, where they would have black dots, representing their eyes, added to them. Farther down the belt they would be wrapped in plastic and the plastic sealed on both ends. They floated on down to the end of the line, where they were loaded into boxes, the boxes into cardboard cartons, ready for shipment. Sometimes the line flowed with other seasonal products, marshmallow Easter rabbits, ersatz chocolate jack-o'-lanterns, candy canes, hard candies in the shapes of Santa or reindeer or stars. Perhaps the candy was filled with preservatives, or perhaps the lack of any natural ingredients meant there was no possibility of deterioration. At any rate the lead time between the manufacturing of the candy and the holiday on which it was meant to be consumed was generally six months.

One day in July or August, a day when the temperature outside was in the nineties, and it must have been even hotter inside School House Candy, my sister Sandra came home from working there in a mood that mixed depression and fury, bemoaning the endless yellow marshmallow Easter chicks that had flowed along the belt that day, the sickly sweet smell of which clung to her hair and skin. I was in the bathtub when she got home, and she screamed at me, "Get out of the tub! I am so hot! I need a bath! Let me in the bathroom!"

Who bought those cheap candies? Even when I was a kid and had a palate that could politely be described as indiscriminating, I hated the sort of candy produced there. Its only salient feature was its sugariness, and it had too much of that. After a few bites of it, the cloying sweetness would make your throat sore. I suppose the candy was bought by people who had so little money they could afford nothing else, or those who felt forced to go along with the rites of Halloween, and grudgingly gave out the fake chocolate jack-o'-lanterns or witches' hats made of artificially flavored black licorice.

I applied for a job at School House Candy, dutifully filling out the application. When I got ushered into the office for the interview, the man behind the desk was clearly embarrassed by my presence. When I try to call up the scene now, I cannot see his face, just a shiny suit of Dacron or Orlon, a no-wrinkle, drip-dry polyester shirt that had taken on a grayish sheen; a narrow necktie. He fiddled awkwardly with that narrow necktie, moving it back and forth between his index and middle fingers while he struggled to put together a coherent sentence. “Well, you know,” he said. He glanced up at the ceiling. “Your...your...you know...” He stopped staring at the ceiling and stared at a point above my head. “Leg,” he finally managed to say. “Leg.”

Then he said the word “Insurance,” and then, once again, he said, “Insurance. The thing is,” and at last he seemed able to speak, “the insurance company worries about these things. I would have to talk to them and get an okay from them.”

He told me he would check with the insurance company and call me back, and I actually believed him.

But of course he didn't call me.

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In the mid-1950s Hugh Gallagher, who had been disabled as a result of polio, seeking to fulfill a lifelong dream of attending Oxford, applied for a Rhodes Fellowship. Gallagher's application was neither accepted nor rejected. It was simply returned to him unprocessed. When Cecil Rhodes established the fellowships, he had stipulated that they were to go to those who were “fit in mind and body.” Gallagher later learned that a special meeting had been convened to decide what to do about his application. The decision was made to act as if the application had never been received. Gallagher refers to this as a “very English sort of rejection,” but to me it seemed the way that disability discrimination often happened—obliquely, with an air of embarrassment and averted glances, the word “uh” punctuating the conversation.

How often I have experienced what I did with the man at School House Candy, who could not put a sentence together. In the face of disability, language itself becomes crippled. It trips over itself, it stutters, it becomes awkward, ungainly, even paralyzed. A little while ago my friend Susan, who had just come back from visiting her parents told me that her mother asked after me—although not by name. “What did she say?” I asked. “How's your friend with the funny last name—Hand? Toe?” “No,” Susan said. “That's not how she described you.” “Oh,” I said, drawing the word out and laughing. “How's your disabled friend?” No, not that. “*Handicapped?*” I asked. “Crippled?” It turned out that Susan's mother had said, “How's your friend who's—uh—uh?”

When I started writing fiction, dialogue came easily to me—I think because I was used to listening for what people were saying beneath their words. All my life I've had to understand how utterances sought to conceal as well as to reveal—and yet, inevitably, showed the very thing their speakers thought they were hiding. I had to finely hone my ability to hear what was beneath polite lies and evasions, to see the discomfort that people thought they were keeping secret.

I didn't argue with the man at School House Candy, or with any of the other people who out-and-out refused to hire me because of my disability.

I was not, of course, asking for what we would today call “reasonable accommodation” at School House Candy—for instance, a job that could be done seated, or even a stool on which I could perch while working on the line. Such a notion was unimaginable in those days. I applied for the job fully expecting to stand for my entire shift. Would I have been in pain at the end of a shift? Of course I would have been.

I did not know that anyone else had ever experienced the rejection and discrimination I was experiencing. I must have heard of Randolph Bourne, an opponent of World War I, whose book *Youth and Life* was considered the original manifesto of the youth counterculture. And I had read John Dos Passos’s sprawling trilogy, *USA*, in which Bourne was described as “a tiny twisted unscared ghost in a black cloak hopping along the grimy old brick and brownstone streets still left in downtown New York, crying out in a shrill soundless giggle: War is the health of the state.” Had I realized that the words “tiny,” “twisted,” “hopping” were Dos Passos’s way of describing Bourne’s disability—a facial deformity stemming from a “messy birth” and a hunched back caused by tuberculosis of the spine?

In his seminal essay, “The Handicapped,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911, Bourne wrote of his quest for work:

I besieged for nearly two years firm after firm, in search of a permanent position, trying everything in New York in which I thought I had the slightest chance of success, meanwhile making a precarious living from a few music lessons. The attitude toward me ranged from “You can’t expect us to create a place for you,” to, “How could it enter your head that we should find any use for a man like you?”

With his family in straitened circumstances, Bourne’s need for work was acute:

There is a poignant mental torture that comes with such an experience—the urgent need, the repeated failure, or rather the repeated failure even to obtain a chance to fail, the realization that those at home can ill afford to have you idle, the growing dread of encountering people—all this is something that those who have never been through it can never realize.

I didn’t know that Randolph Bourne had been through what I was going through. I had read a lot about the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964—credited with being the big bang that started the student movement. Had I read of Jacobus tenBroek, a leading faculty supporter of that movement? If I had read anything about him, I would almost certainly have known that he was blind, since any description of him would have highlighted this point. I wouldn’t have known that he had cowritten a text, *Hope*

*Deferred: Public Welfare and the Blind*, in which he spoke of the restrictions on the lives of blind people as a civil rights issue.

I didn't know that in New York in the 1930s, a group of disabled workers and would-be workers—many of whom had, in all likelihood, been paralyzed by polio in the 1916 New York City epidemic—found themselves deemed, by



sank into that foam rubber, leaving them with a musty smell and a sunk-in grittiness that could not be washed away. (I knew both the smell and the grittiness, because I had once had such crutches.) My crutches were aluminum, and I had replaced the gray hand grips they had come with with brightly colored ones designed for a kid's bicycle, with red and pink streamers coming from them.

It was vitally important to me that I not be seen with the other boy who had had polio. (I could make up a name for him, but let me leave that gaping hole of the name I don't remember.) People might think we were two of life's rejects, clinging to each other: or worse, they might think our companionship sweet, touching, poignant, and above all fitting.

I told myself I had good reason for my contempt. I did not hate him because he was disabled. I hated him because his shirt was always untucked. I had contempt for him because his mother picked him up after school—he was a spoiled baby.

My mother did not pick me up after school. I used to walk, along with everyone else, from the rise on the far edge of downtown Providence across the pedestrian mall—designed to make the experience of shopping there more like a visit to the suburban shopping centers that were springing up in Warwick and Cranston—to wait for the 52 Hope bus that would drop me at the corner of Hope and Larch Streets; from there I would walk two and a half blocks up the hill,





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