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A Simple Man. A Not So Simple Story.

Jason William Cook; a man whose nomadic lifestyle encompasses this almost romantic view on the working American. Once proud of his figure, he now finds himself reminiscing of his more athletic build, from a time when hair grew on his head. Perhaps a less stressful time in his life. Now, growing winter layers in the summer heat, he is but a short glance of his former self. Two people with a lifetime of work between them.

The importance of “the American Dream” within society’s “blue collar” populous plays a subtle but key role within their lives motivating their struggles and sacrifices made for the promise of a better future. These are stories which have been told numerous times within American literature and the arts. The fascination to re-tell this story throughout American history instills within us the roots of American culture and its influence into the daily lives of Americans.

From the country music genre to modern-era novels, you can place these people's lives into these works of art. However, what makes these stories different is the characters behind the works of art -- the characters in which songs are written for and about. The fascination to retell these stories is to pay homage to individuals that live their lives to work and provide for their families. To work with their own two hands and learn the trades they believe will provide them and their loved ones with a better life.

The sun that afternoon was devastatingly warm and humid. I found myself arriving at the front of his apartment, where Jason was outside drinking a canned Keystone Light (a personal favorite of his) and I, arriving with the wettest brow, planned to quickly refresh myself in my apartment upstairs.

“Go grab yourself a drink and come on down so we can chat,” he yelled.

I grabbed myself a bottled strawberry blonde Shiner, went back downstairs and began our conversation.

“I was a typical boy, let’s put it that way,” he started.

We sat together in the shade of the upstairs walkway, both facing the line of cars in-front of the apartment. He seemed to enjoy being in the spotlight, as though he’d been waiting to tell his own tale of the story that is his life.

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Jason William Cook, 38, was born and raised in Ballinger, Texas. Since he was an adolescent boy running around Ballinger, Texas, Cook thought himself capable and able of doing whatever it was he wanted. Like most brash young Texans, he thought himself a man, long before anyone else did.

“Looking back at it now, I wouldn’t say I was a grown man until I was 25 years old,” Jason said.

The first time he left home was when Cook left to join the military when he was 18 years old.

“I joined the Marines because my friends did. Hell, at that time I didn’t know a lot about the government. I learned a lot of discipline that I didn’t have but I needed,” Cook recalled.

Cook spent four years of his life in the Marines and once he got out he tried to become a firefighter seeing as that was what he was trained to do in the Marine Corps. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen nepotism within the department, he didn't get in after basic training.

"It was the friend of the cousin's wife that got the job," Cook said.

There was a slight pause in the conversation, it appeared that something struck a chord with Jason. Reminiscing can so easily break through our facial facades.

"After I couldn't get into the fire department, I went to go work out in the oil fields in New Mexico for a year. I later found out they were sending them rigs up to California and since I had just got back from there when I was in the military, I didn't want to go back," he said.

For Jason, it seemed that the drive he needed was to continue to strive for a better future, to move forward instead of going back.

"This is where things start to get a lil' simple. I did two years with my father-in-law. I worked for them guys for two years and then got picked up to do a water treatment plant in Wichita Falls," Cook said.

"One day a guy comes up to me and asks 'How much you makin?' and I told him '\$12 an hour. I've been makin' \$12 an hour for two years now'."

"He says, 'Not anymore, and gave me a \$5 raise. This was the first time in my life I had ever gotten a raise. I was ecstatic. I thought that's awesome,'" Cook explained.

As Jason was talking, he reminded me of the John Steinbeck novel Of Mice and Men. The story is based on the premise of two migrant field workers, one of the two being intelligent but uneducated and the other mentally disabled. Their dream is to one day settle down on a piece of their own land. It's the simple concept of striving for a better place which seems to run through every generation in America: the idea that even if all the odds are stacked against you, you can still dream of the perfect life. With Jason, I noticed the excitement in his face as he described his journey from the Marines into getting his first job. He revels in his own narrative.

When Jason completed that job, he was at a crossroads. He didn't have another job lined up and he thought he was going home to either work for his father-in-law or find another job. He described himself as a "lost soul" -- a common characterization of someone betwixt and between destinations.

"Then I got a phone call saying, 'Pack your stuff and follow Steve Fagan to Kansas. I want you in Kansas with me,'" Cook said.

With that, he stood up from the chair he was in and went back inside. I was alone with my thoughts. At this point the sun was setting on the horizon, and the street lights began to flicker on with flying insects hovering around my ears. He returned with a fresh 6-pack of Keystone. He offered me one. In most cases I'd happily decline, but tonight was no normal night, so I accepted the beverage. I sat there drinking a beer with this man as he told me his story. I sipped in disgust, but kept it to myself. It was like we were two old pals catching up.

"So that's what I did: I called my wife. We had just gotten married at this time, and I called her up in Oklahoma City. She said 'Where you at? Aren't you supposed to be home already?' I said to her, 'I ain't coming home darling, I'm on my way to Kansas.'"

For the three years that Jason was in Kansas he learned every trade he needed to learn through his Superintendent. Within four years, he was the Superintendent.

"I finally decided I needed to get closer to home. At this time, my wife had just had our daughter," Cook recalled.

The commitment to his job and his career, to make a better life for his wife and daughter, is a commendable act. It strikes me how similar his own journey is to many described even before he was born.

He was in Kansas for six years where he worked on several different projects he says he's proud to say he helped build. His first project as Superintendent was the first Warrior in Transition project in the nation that was part of the Wounded Warrior Project. Similar to most of the project in Jason's life this one just fell into his fingertips. However, it is one of the projects that he was happy and proud enough of to say he was apart of.

This project provides, Warrior Transition Units (WTUS) which provide mission command, medical management and assistance in transition for Soldiers to help navigate their way through the Army's medical treatment system as well as assistance in to successfully reintegrate back into the force or transition from the Army. (*U.S. Army*).

Perhaps it was his military background that gave this project all the more meaning. Or perhaps it was his passion for construction that encouraged Jason to be part of a project that kept him away from his family.

His connection to his work is a strong emotional bond, as being so distant from his family for an extended period of time, it must come natural for people in Jason's situation to attach to the work they create. They stick to it like glue.

"I got a phone call one day from my wife Leslie one day and she says 'I leased a place in Waco and I'm moving back to Texas, if you want to stay together come help me move. If you don't, well I'm still going back to Texas,'" Cook said.

For Jason, this was do or die. He knew his job was taking a toll on his family but he also knew he wanted to provide for them and construction was his passion. He made a decision.

"I got myself a job in Midland. It was the closest thing they had, so there I was in between Midland and Waco. It hasn't been easy for me, it hasn't been easy for us," Cook said. Cooks commitment to his work has always been at the forefront of who he is.

"I've worked my ass off my entire life and I know one day I'll get to enjoy it with Leslie and Emry," Jason said.

So when his wife gave him an ultimatum he knew he needed to decide. To enjoy his life together with his family or choose his work.

Sunset. The wind had finally picked up as I was sitting with my luke-warm Keystone, and as I waited for Jason to return outside from taking a phone call, I contemplated the thought of leaving my own family to pursue a job which, in the long run, would deprive my family of my presence. It's difficult to understand the pressures and strains of Jason's situation, as I'm truly looking through the glass into his world.

Jason's wife Leslie is a physical therapist at the Baylor Scott and White Hospital in Waco, Texas, where she splits her time between work and raising their daughter Emry.

"I go home every two weeks now," Jason said.

"There was a time when I was only able to go home eight weeks at a time. That was the longest I'd ever been away from home and it was horrible, but my girls are being taking care of. That's all that matters to me." There was a smile on his face as he sipped his Keystone Light.

For many, it might seem strange that this man splits his time from place to place but most especially that he splits his time between his family and his work for such a long period of time. It is definitely an unorthodox familial situation but what is "normal" these days? I sat there thinking about the man Jason Cook is, where he came from, how he got to where he is and realized that

sitting next to me was a man who was not afraid to work. He knew troubled waters but he wasn't going to sit there and drown. He was going to get up and do something, be someone.

"I live a lonely life five days out of the week and then my real life begins on the weekend," Cooks said quickly after a brief pause in our conversation.

I believed it.

The next day, I found myself riding shotgun in a two door white Chevrolet truck. While on our way to the construction site Jason is the Superintendent of and all I could think about was the smell of dirt and sweat that the truck illuminated. Empty gatorade bottles rolled around the floor board the entire drive over. Every bump we hit, about a dozen empty bottles would swish around my feet.

There I was listening to The Zac Brown Band driving down a single lane road with Jason. It was a drive he has done almost every single day for the past 9 months, but on a road I didn't even know existed. On our drive he tells me a story about seeing a buck fighting with a doe one morning on his way to work.

"It was so hard to watch," he said.

I asked him why.

"Because, I wanted to shoot them so badly. I'm a hunter - that was like a great opportunity - and instead I had to get my ass to work" Cook, said jokingly.

As we arrived on the job site, I got out of the truck and the next thing I know Jason tossed me a white hard hat with his company's logo on it.

"Put this on darlin.' We don't want you gettin' hurt now," Cook said to me.

I put the hat on and we walked into his office. It was such a mess, with papers everywhere. He had a printer in the room and a desk phone, along with a dozen receipts on his desk.

"I know, I know, I've got a lot to take care of today. It'll get done," he said.

"I wasn't going to say anything," I told him jokingly.

We walked around for a bit. He said I couldn't stay for too long because I was a "liability issue". However, what I noticed was a man in his element.

"Hey, partner!" was all I could hear over and over for the first 5 minutes upon our arrival. There was banter between him and his crew. They joked at their slow progress and joked about not being able to remember what it's like to feel cold. I couldn't agree more. It was so hot, I couldn't believe these men spend all day long working out in this Texas heat.

We walked the site for a little bit longer, I saw him delegate a few tasks to his crew and then we left. We got back in the truck as we drove to drop me off at the apartment complex. I looked down at the swishing Gatorades at my feet and wished they were nice and cold and full.

On the drive back I commended his work and his ableness to stand out in the heat all day long.

"Don't get me wrong, sweetie. This heat is not my friend. I've learned my lesson. I wear sunscreen every single day, especially around my ears. When they burn, they really burn," he said laughing.

In his truck I noticed a picture by his steering wheel. I pointed it out to him and asked who that was. He picked up the picture and passed it to me so I could have a closer look. It was a photograph of the sweetest looking blonde little girl.

"Well, that's the reason why I wear sunscreen everyday and why I work out in the heat everyday. That's my four year-old Emry. Ain't she the cutest little thing?" Cook said with a smile.

Author's Afterword:

Interviewing Jason was an interesting experience. I always see Jason outside his apartment when I get home but I didn't really know him. Every now and then he would offer me a beer or offer me a plate of food when he was cooking outside, so I knew he was a nice man. I also noticed that other families in the apartment complex would stop and chat with him or sit and have a beer. I could sometimes hear them laughing from upstairs, it was an interesting experience to be part of the laughter and not wonder what was going on. I got a sense of who the man who lives below me is and what his story is. Jason's story can be seen as commendable. He is willing to do anything for his family. Even if it means not seeing his family every day. Out of all the articles I've written in this class I believe this is my most successful article. I was able to pace myself between interviewing Jason and actually just spending time in his element to more accurately portray his personality. When writing this piece I realized that every one has a story waiting to be told no matter how simple or how complex.