

Truant Tourist

ROBERT FOX



WRITER'S COMMENT: Despite being an English major, I never thought of myself as much of a creative writer. My emphasis in the major being in the literary theory and criticism track, I managed to get through my entire college career without taking a single creative writing class. But this past spring, during my last ever quarter before graduation, I decided to broaden my horizons and learn to accept that even someone like myself, who has never written up prose for fun in his free time, can embrace a more creative side. I enrolled in Pam Houston's ENL 100NF, the nonfiction creative writing seminar, where we learned how to tap into real-life personal experiences to craft powerful narratives. I learned much from my talented peers and professor, despite feeling like I was playing catch up for ten weeks. My hope is that others reading my story, who have similarly felt like they lack a creative outlet, can be inspired by their own personal experiences and begin writing themselves, even if it's just about a day off from school.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Even upon reading the first draft of Robert's essay, "Truant Tourist," I was impressed with the depth and breadth of sly commentary it contains. In the voice of a kind of slouching truant who can't seem to get it together to show up for high school (for weeks at a time) the narrator delivers a scorching critique of capitalism, of the extreme class divide in the city of San Francisco and the obliviousness of the rich newcomers to the very existence of the much larger population who is struggling (three people, a dog and a cat in

one bedroom) to make ends meet. Robert effectively uses his love of the film Ferris Bueller's Day Off to expose the American myth of the lighthearted days of high school, to the point where the movie takes on a kind of sinister tone by the end of the essay. In these times of climate change, expanding income gaps, and diminishing compassion, "Truant Tourist" beautifully captures the inertia and paralysis of a generation whose world has been voided of hope by the previous generation, by my generation. Robert took the advice of his classmates on revision, and leaned in effectively to all the things that were working in that original draft to create an essay that will stay with the reader for a long time.

—Pam Houston, Department of English

My day starts off with good intentions. Like every other day, I tell myself that this time, I'll smother my shame and go to school. I get up and dress for the November coastal air. I make sure to pack my Muni FastPass, its bolded Y for "Youth" reminding me of my place in the world. I then slide on my loaded backpack, full of books and binders I'll for sure need for today's class. Class I'll for sure be going to. There's no doubt about that.

Leaving my small apartment that guests have called "cozy" without knowing about the cramped single bedroom housing three people, a dog, and a cat, I head off to the nearest relevant bus stop. I walk with purpose. I'm on my own morning commute, one shared by hundreds of thousands in this city. I'm not alone anymore but part of a group headed towards progress in some way, shape, or form. A progress that'll take me out of the dregs of the self-pitying past. Well, at least for the next fifteen minutes it will.

I need to catch the outbound 29-Sunset bus line to get to school. I also need to catch the next outbound 29-Sunset bus line to get to school on time. But my purposeful walk soon turns into a subconsciously minded pace that—surprise, surprise—gets me to the 29 stop just as my bus pulls away from the curb. Well, I'm not going to take the next one and get to school late. After missing close to two weeks of class, I'm not about to make my surely much noticed return by coming in late. That'd be silly. Instead, it'd be best if I took the day off. Again. I'll be ready to head back to school tomorrow. Still, I'm still angry at myself for letting

this happen. Again. I need to cool off, and a walk through the chilly morning fog would be just the thing.

I spend much of my free time (and time meant for school) consuming media with a high school setting. I know on the surface that these idyllic worlds aren't true to reality, but I want to escape to them anyway. John Hughes movies are my favorite, especially *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. I'm much like Ferris in how often he skips school, and I make sure to hold fast to that comparison when things feel rough. He has this inspiring sense of all-knowing mischief, but genuine kindness too. Everyone's obsessed with him, from loving classmates to disgruntled principals and older sisters. I may lack his wealth, supportive parents, quirky best friends, and straight-up charisma. But I want my days off to be like his, full of memory-making adventures that I can look fondly back on.

Maybe today I'll make the best of it. Maybe today can be my day off, my touring of the City by the Bay that parallels John Hughes' love letter to the Windy City. There probably won't be any spontaneous sessions as parade leaders or trips to fancy restaurants after a ball game, but I'm sure I'll find something Ferris-worthy to help ease the guilt of skipping class.

Hiking through the sloped streets for several blocks make the Sisyphean reminder on my back weigh down on my mind. I really should've just left behind those books and binders if I was going to skip class anyways. The paranoid fear of being approached by a truant officer starts to crop up. I try to appear older with my outfit and gait, and I hope my sleep-ridden face from frequent time spent staying up late ignoring any semblance of schoolwork helps. I need to get on a bus. Any bus will do. And it just so happens that the 28-19th Avenue line is inbound.

The 28 proceeds along 19th Avenue, one of the longest vertical streets in the city. And it's quite conveniently heading in the opposite direction from school. The hour or so ride to the end of the line will ideally make for some quality nap time. But bumpy hills abound on the 28. And they make for something of a rude awakening, especially when freshly trained drivers have trigger happy braking legs.

Since sleep's not much of an option, thoughts and sounds come creeping in. School's not working out. I can probably catch up during a dedicated weekend or two. Who am I kidding? That won't happen. Old man two rows up clipping his ancient fingernails. Clip, clip. Nasty. The color of them matches the bus's brown and yellow interior, no doubt a

remnant of the 70s or 80s. Ferris didn't ride the bus. Does Chicago not have reliable public transportation? He's too cool to ride the bus. Wonder what life will be like in a year or two. Back in online high school? Didn't work out the last two years. Tried to get put back in normal school, one with people I once knew. Thought making friends would be easier in person. Turns out doing nothing in a physical school isn't much better than doing nothing in an online one. Two kids around my age laugh as they get on. Are they playing hooky too? That or they're running an hour late to class. Wow, they're braver than I am. At least they have each other if they get caught. Ferris had Cameron and Sloane for his memory-making trip. I got nobody. Got put in a shitty ghetto school full of shitty ghetto kids. The small one that ghetto freshmen don't want to go to. The one two buses away from the big ghetto school all their friends are attending. Wait, that's not fair. There are some good people there, people who know your name only after a few months. Laid back seniors who say hi when you walk by. Near nonexistent budget means no textbooks and lockers, but the young teachers seem driven and passionate, like they won't want to give up on you. Doesn't matter. Not where I want to be.

Thoughts and sounds subside as the 28 offers up a soothing scenic view of the coast and Golden Gate towards the last leg of the line. Few other passengers are around to take in the view. During those quiet hours between the morning rush and lunch, even a city like San Francisco can seem hushed. The constant city fog envelops the bridge, seemingly blocking off the city's northern exit. Sign on the right, *Warning: Last Exit Before Golden Gate Bridge*. And I wonder if the 28 will finally make the push towards the north bay and out of this crowded and empty city. Will it cleave through the fog as it traverses the bridge that collapses only in fictional sci-fi media set in the city? But the bus pulls off at the last exit, as it always does, back towards reality.

Last Stop: Fort Mason. It's just me and the driver by the time we reach the marina part of the Marina District. Despite his amateurish control of the route making me think I could do a better job than he, even though I don't have a license, I feel grateful for his part in my day off. It's no Ferrari joyride with a neurotic best friend and pretty girl, but it'll have to do.

The familiar Safeway with its dated sign spans the empty parking lot. I head in for some apple fritters and soda. Even though it's still morning, the pastries all seem deflated and stale. And yet they taste as good as they

did a few days ago. Luckily it's the end of the month, so mom gave me the food stamps card to use the remaining balance on afterschool snacks. Shame once again guides me through the self-checkout aisle and I'm off with an even heavier load on my back, but a lighter one on my mind. Sweet things tend to do that.

Climbing up the nearby hill takes you to a yuppie-filled park overlooking the pier. Baby Björn-wearing 30-year-olds go buzzing by in their Fitbits and \$300 Nikes. The bouncing babies look like parasitic overlords controlling their robotic parental units, demanding satisfaction for all their wanted and unwanted needs. And judging by the lavish upbringing heaped upon them, I bet those kids won't be much different in 20 years. I want what they're having. I want a cool tech job. I want a cool cramped condo with brick walls and rooftop garden parties, the kind you see in ads for jeans and mass-produced craft beers. I don't want to share a bed with my mom and sister anymore. I don't want to be a guest in my uncle's apartment anymore, where I can't comfortably invite my nonexistent friends. I want my own place with framed vintage movie posters and a glass-top coffee table covered in collectable gaming magazines, the ones that smell like the crisp childhood of my past, not the ones gathering mold in the overpriced storage unit that drains any chance for potential financial stability. I want a fridge full of whole foods from Whole Foods, with a fancy icemaker built in. I want to be a hip techie, but those techie types don't belong here. The world they created doesn't belong here. And the world I want doesn't belong here, which is good since I probably won't be getting any part of it.

I'm brought back to Ferris and friends as I look for a bench not still stricken by dewy delight. They lived in pseudo-mansions in the suburbs of Chicago, right? Ferris complained how his sister got a car for her birthday, while he only got a computer. Still seems like a pretty sweet deal to me. A couple of college hipsters walk by, probably art or film majors from SF State, their late 80s gear looking like something extras from a Hughes movie would wear. Hipsters share with techies the same two-sided gold coin of any early-2010s city. Many of them looking like SoCal transplants with their vintage puffy-sleeved denim jackets and high-waisted jeans of yesteryear. Despite their differing appearances, both techies and hipsters go to the same trendy restaurants filled with reclaimed wood benches and other industrial silver aesthetics, and they see the same indie bands performing at The Fillmore. They don't belong

here either, in this city full of non-natives.

After my search for a dry bench in this permanently damp city fails, and after some walking and uneventful bus and train transfers, I stop in the heart of the Financial District. Coming out of the pits of perpetually scuffed subway stations, I'm blasted by the crisp downtown air, funneled from the coast and through the many skyscrapers, some of which are notoriously sinking. But even sea breezes can't lift away the stench of stale piss from the station's stained stairwells. The homeless who line up along the streets here during the weekend and pander to unsuspecting tourists have been replaced with busy people in suits chattering away on their early model iPhones. A Starbucks or Peets takes up a location every half block with hours that cater only to the businessmen's needs. Only the garbage piles shoved up along the curb suggest the previous tenants' presence. That and the occasional suspiciously brown waist-high streaks on abandoned storefronts. Guess the City Public Works missed a few spots with the power washers. They'll have a chance to miss them again next week.

I eventually pass the high-end brand name boutiques and arrive at Union Square. Being a week after Thanksgiving means the city's in a full-on holiday rush, enough to make even the most holiday-conscious midwestern grandma blush. The giant fake tree erected at the heart of the square marks the beginning of the Christmas shopping season, and adjacent to it lies the seasonal ice rink. Being the middle of a work day in the middle of the work week means that only tourists are out to play. One family in particular catches my attention. Judging from their height and accent, I assume they're from a Scandinavian country. I envy their clear skin and good clothes. Mom and Dad seem overly enthused to show their youngest the American ice rink, which I'm sure vastly differs from those back home. Yet I empathize with their teenaged member and the shy look on his face. He looks like he belongs here about as much as I do.

I sit on a nearby bench, the midday sun now having swept away any remnants of morning dew, and self-consciously eat my cheap pastry and gaze out at all the nearby high rises, department stores, and billboards for luxury goods. Despite how densely populated this city has become, and how the vastly culturally different districts seemingly stretch out the peninsula, geographically speaking, San Francisco isn't very big. Large portions were built upon literal landfills from the coast. With such shaky and shallow foundations holding onto so much, it's no wonder

earthquakes can devastate so much of the city. So much luxury built upon a sea of old garbage. I finish my modest meal as the family of tourists head off towards the nearby Apple flagship store. Or maybe they're going to the Gucci, Louis Vuitton, or Chanel boutiques—they're all in the area.

The school day's coming to an end, and the various buses and trains will soon be loading up with kids heading home for the day. Guess I should beat the rush. The walk back home brings up the buried anxieties of the day. What if school finally calls home to ask about my absence, or worse, sends somebody to check up on me? My paranoia leads me to spend an extra hour skulking around my neighborhood, keeping an eye out for any administrative nuisance. Principal Rooney comically pursues Ferris, but he's always one step behind and ready to catch his comeuppance. Ferris's sister, frustrated at the obsession everyone else has for her brother, steps in and defends Ferris once Rooney finally gets the upper hand. But I don't think I'll have the same sort of celebratory reunion when I get back. It'll just be a whole lot of nothing. Hopefully. And if it's anything like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day and even week before that, it'll be a whole lot of nothing. I don't think I quite found Ferris Bueller's truly special day off this day. But there are other parts of the city to explore, and other places to see the same old San Francisco take hold of my life. Maybe tomorrow I'll find what I'm looking for. Maybe tomorrow I'll catch the 29 when it comes. Maybe tomorrow I won't feel like such a tourist in my own life.