

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

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An Apologia for Boarding School

People always ask me about boarding school, with varying questions:

"Whoah, what was THAT like?"

"Wow, that's one of the best schools in the country."

"What did you do to make your parents send you away?"

This usually leads to a full-on conversation because for question one, there's no one liner to give to the largest experience of your life. For question two, there's no quick way to explain the many layers to the experience. And for the third question, you usually have to space out some time and try not to be condescending, because these schools are elite. On its face, my suggested response to the third question is a bold, prejudicial, de facto judgment of that person. It would turn you, the reader's, eyes away and maybe incite a return judgment: "Boarding school kids, so full of themselves." And you would be right. And wrong.

I am in the habit of not defending the boarding school experience, in part because it's the truth. Say, as a small child, slim chance, but you love your parents and your family. There is something purely unnatural and alien about leaving home after eighth grade. Something is bruised inside of you when you are sitting for the first time in a cold New England cell with an off orange rug when you're 13, staring at the wall. You may think as an adult that you would have loved it. You would be wrong. I have seen homesickness put guys in the fetal position that I would draft very high on my all time "if you ever needed guys around you in a dark alley team". You begin your time there not right in the head, this much I can assure you.

You are also in an uncharted and dark land. High school is a time of being unbalanced, of changing personalities, clothing, thinner ice than the Massachusetts winters produce, and all of the other clichés to be thrown upon this experience. In all of the shows I have ever seen about high school, when the pot got a little too close to boil, the main character would always return home to their room to think things out, assured of the aura of their family and their memories of innocence still running alongside them through the last lap of childhood. Their core was still intact. Boarding school did not package this feature, the core was gone and you were supposed to build something else here or stare at the peeling wall in your New England cell with the off color orange rug. There was no respite. This was your life and your whole life. A number of us have done things in high school that we regretted later on, I would put it out there that whole personalities of brilliant kids were built on false or shoddy (read: manipulative, detached) foundation due mostly to this marathon built before us. Some of these elements may be universal to the high school experience i.e. the world is nasty, brutish, and you are alone, but the introduction, for most, comes at a time when they are more prepared than we were to pallet them as children.

The final element was humbling. I was a young achiever, I was used to being excellent. Here, excellence and better were all around me. My talents were not being nurtured, my small community of supporters when I

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

was younger was no longer there, and I was in the fight of my life to compete with the minds that were imported from all areas of the country (on top of learning how to be in college at 13). I was swimming hard and fast, and no matter how talented I was, if I wasn't going to swim, it was time to go. So I was humbled and then shown the wheel I would be running on to keep the pace. It's not glitzy.

I wanted to leave boarding school for the first two or three months. I felt as though I wasn't built for this and I lost all concept of why in the world I was subjecting myself to all of the above. If this was achievement, what was the point? This leads to the other reason I didn't defend the experience.

Countless times in a bar or a conference room or an event of social goings-on, I will find a fellow boarding school alum, when met with these same questions, rehashing rehearsed platitudes about boarding school:

"Best experience of my life!"

"Made me the man I am today."

"It was great to attend a high school with such a rich history and be challenged every day."

It is always freshly repulsing. First, platitudes are disingenuous and unhelpful, leaving the experience shrouded in fake fog and Oz-like uncertainty, and secondly I surmised that it must be the exact type of people that would dare to vocalize this kind of broken thought that would posit that the experience was worth something. While I may have been right about some of those people, I was generally wrong in this line of thinking. There was something that going to Andover gave to me that lasted, and it took many years to count that as genuine, and with hope.

Boarding school did two things. It gave you the chaos I described above, and it worked at the job of indirectly reminding you that you were excellent, and that your mind and your wits are all that you have and the most important thing you can ever continue to perfect in your life. There were superior teachers, there were prodigious minds around you, and there were the "elite" school meetings with CEO's and with famous writers that did carry with them the whispers that you were the best. From an aesthetic view, many of the events and the swagger of Andover was arrogant, and there's not much of an apology for this. But I would offer the supposition that it was part of a chemistry experiment of pressure and time that unleashed many young, brilliant minds from a protective, comfortable, scared shell that many brilliant adult minds who were not similarly challenged are still attempting to climb out of.

And in staring into the blank difficulty of the experience, it required that at a very young age you apply a special brand of "Fuck It" that existed within the chaos. Some people weren't going to get there but if you did, you had built a belief in yourself beyond what you would encounter in life as it passes: the personal losses, superficial judgments, the general mileage extracted from you over time. There have, without question, been times in my life where my mind and my wits were all that seemed left, from losses to real physical pain. And there was also a boldness within that remembered when my mind picked itself up on an icy November morning in

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

Massachusetts at age 13 and said, "Fuck it. It's not going to beat me."

I took that attitude and that boldness with me, and sometimes it ran me into a door and sometimes it carried me into a greater purpose of life and every time it carried me into that purpose I was thankful for all of the elements that helped me trust it and helped me to allow it to work on me.

So that is what Andover, in part, left me with and that is what sticks and is worthwhile and it is the truth of the experience so far as I can fling it; It doesn't suggest that this process of life can't be entered into other ways or through other means, or that people can't find themselves in different ways nor do I intend it as a story of sorrow and persecution - but the platitudes are bullshit. Your personhood depends on the introduction of pain, and this was part of mine, and for that I am grateful.

Now let's all put our spectacles and bowties on and end on a grandiose quote found in a musty library:

*"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."* —William Ernest Henley

I am also often asked:

"Well, would you send your kids there?"

I would have a long talk with them.