

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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Back to School, A Personal Essay

Spring 1971

The Boy sits in his bedroom at his desk. On his dresser are plastic models of Frankenstein and The Wolfman (no Corvettes here); a bat, ball, and glove sit in the corner; baseball cards and comic books are everywhere. He cleans his eyeglasses and starts to review the booklet he got from his sister Joanne. "Program of Studies. Stoneham High School. 1970-71." Jo was graduating high school in a couple of months and going off to someplace called Westfield. He'd looked it up in his atlas. It looked far away, closer to New York than their hometown of Stoneham. At least it was still in Massachusetts.

As for The Boy, he was finishing up third grade, his best class ever! He thought about breaking out his chemistry set and practicing the experiment he was going to do next week for Show & Tell. It was pretty basic. You mixed calcium acetate with water, added some denatured alcohol, and in two minutes you had petroleum jelly. He had the experiment down pat but worried about having to talk for those two minutes, before he would dramatically turn the test tube upside down over Miss McQuinn's desk. Voila! Instead of a mess spilling out, it has turned into jelly and stays in the test tube.

But he could mess around with that later. Right now, he had serious work to do.

He tilted the desktop open and got a few sheets of plain math paper and a ruler. He made sure the paper was straight on the desk then taped down the upper corners, like he saw one time in a book about drafting. He measured one inch up from the sides, and one inch from the bottom and top, and made dots with a pencil. He used the ruler and pencil, connected the dots and had a nice rectangle.

The Boy consulted his notes. He'd decided on six lines for each grade, and line between each grade, so the crosswise lines would be $\frac{3}{4}$ inch apart. He also needed up and down lines to make columns of 1, $3\frac{1}{2}$, and 2 inches. When he was finished measuring, dotting, and making lines, he labeled the middle column "Name of Class."

Over the next two hours, The Boy planned his four years of High School. When he finished, he tried to imagine what those senior year classes would be like. Latin IV, calculus, physics. About all he knew was that Latin was an ancient language, and the other two involved really hard math. He asked Jo about them and was surprised to find out she hadn't taken them. "Those are for honors kids," she said as she looked over his schedule. She shook her head in the affirmative. "You might be able to do it though."

The possibilities amazed him.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Fall 1974

The Boy's first junior high dance was Friday night. Somehow, he was assigned as their group's beverage procurement agent. As soon as his sister (not Jo, the other one) dropped off the goods, he took off to meet his friends in the woods behind Covelle's house. When he was halfway there, he realized he should have waited half an hour when it would be dark. Instead, he found himself struggling down Congress Street carrying one bag stuffed with three six-packs of Olde Milwaukee and two fifths of Tango, a vodka concoction that he and his friends thought astronauts endorsed (which was actually an orange flavored powdered drink called Tang). The wind was kicking up grit and leaves; he couldn't shield his eyes because his arms were full. He felt exposed and in danger, as if he was carrying a bloody corpse. The cops could roll up and take him away any second now. But he made it.

The dance was a drunken blur but one memory stuck. Glen Farrell, an older kid who lived on The Boy's block and hung around up the Square, did this amazing solo dance right in front of the band as they rocked out "Taking Care of Business" by Bachman Turner Overdrive. The Boy was envious that someone could do that in front of all those people. His inhibitions were such that even shitfaced he knew he'd never have the balls to do that, though he'd like to.

He doesn't remember how he got home, but there are bits and pieces of the scenes that followed. He faced an angry interrogation from his parents, which stopped when he ran to the bathroom and puked way more (in his estimation) than he took in that night. He learned later that the term for puking with nothing coming out was known as "dry heaves." When he finally crawled to bed, he had to keep one foot on the floor to stop what he also later learned are called "bed spins."



Forty-six years later, in November 2020 I wrote a book. Drafted a novel would be more accurate. Drafted what could someday, maybe be a novel, more accurate still.

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) is an annual writing challenge during which participants pledge to produce a 50,000-word first draft of a novel. I heard about it in the fall of 2019, but it was too close to pursue, so I put it in my phone calendar: "Nov. 1, 2020. Write book." I set reminders for three, six, and nine months. It was never far from my mind.

When the three-month reminder chirped, I had a serious talk with myself. I had been telling myself I wanted to be a writer since grade school. I'd taken a couple shots at short stories over the years, and I've journaled for most of my adult life. I have poems I wrote as far back as the late 70s when I was a teenager, mostly mawkish stuff inspired by someone's death.

I was a Bible-reading straight-A student when my other sister facilitated my descent into addiction when I was 12 years old. I first got into recovery at age 25, now married with one daughter. A relapse at 35 ended one career and my marriage. Recovery, relapse, and recovery again in

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

2018. Through it all, I wanted to be a writer. Like a lot of wannabe writers, I read a lot about writing. To the point that my daughter Elisha, at twelve said — without meaning to be scathing and accurate — “Gee Dad, you have a lot of books about writing. Are you ever going to write anything?”

So, when that three-month alert signaled, I had a talk with myself that went something like, “Hey asshole. Either do this or stop saying you want to be a writer and throw all the damn books away.” I went to the NaNoWriMo website to check things out in more detail. Apparently, there is a lot of preparation involved in writing a novel. Some people start up to 6 months before the challenge. My first thought when I learned that was, “Well, maybe next year...” but then I

cut myself off with a string of self-recriminating expletives. This was it; ready or not here I write.

I did what I could to prepare. Besides deciding on the subject, I learned about topics like structure, inciting incident, pantsers versus plotters, showing versus telling. In hindsight I realize I didn’t really learn about those topics, I only learned their definitions. It turned out that the best preparation I had done was reading constantly for over 50 years. I mind mapped (also known as clustering, a graphic way of brainstorming) a general overview of the story and a more detailed plan for the opening.

And then I wrote a book. I would mind map a section, draft it, then mind map the next. I wrote the whole draft in “pomodoros.” That’s from a time management system and means 25-minute increments. (Fun fact: it takes 99 pomodoros to produce 50,000 words.) On Monday, November 30, 2020, I wrote the two most beautiful words in a first-time novelist’s vocabulary: The End. And then, to paraphrase Robert Redford in *The Candidate*, after he somehow wins an unwinnable election, I said, out loud, “What the fuck do I do now?”



Winter 1978

The Boy timed his entrance to the High School to meld in with the third period class change. He needed to meet Gino Martelli to pick up some mescaline. He made his way to the first-floor boy’s room. Gino was already there, priming his disco-dan hair in the cracked mirror.

“What’s up G. You got the purple?”

“Yeah. \$2.50 a pop,” he said, turning to The Boy while he flipped the collar of his NikNik shirt over the lapels of his napa leather jacket. The goombah/disco/wanna-be-made-guy outfit looked good on Gino; The Boy was fine with his faded Levi’s, broken in Herman work boots, pot leaf t-shirt over a waffle-knit thermal, and bomber leather.

“How about 5 for 10?”

“How about \$2.50 a pop?”

“Fine. I’ll take one then. And yeah, I want the fifty cents change.”

Gino laughed. “Okay, okay, Monte Hall, five for ten. Step into my

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

orifice." He walked to the back of the bathroom, behind the stalls, out of sight of the door. The Boy followed, glad Gino's English Leather almost drowned out the smell of urine.

The Boy took out two fives as Gino took a pen out of his shirt pocket, unscrewed it, and tapped out five hits into The Boy's palm as he took the money with his other hand. He screwed the pen together and put it back in his pocket.

"Good deal, bro. Plenty more where those came from, tell your frien..."

The bathroom door crashed open. Vice Principal Ralph Rowell burst in, stood with his suit coat open, hands on his hips.

"I heard something was going down in here," he said, not sounding as cool as he thought. He looked at The Boy. "You being here makes me think I heard right."

The Boy shrugged, his hands in his pockets, his best "fuck you" expression on his face. He'd instinctively tucked the hits into the watch pocket of his jeans when he heard the door crash open.

"OK boys, empty your pockets."

Gino went into Eddie Haskell mode. "Mr. Rowell, all I got is a pen," he said, hands raised, one holding the pen. He did a little pirouette as if that showed his other pockets were clean. "I got an algebra test Mr. Rowell, you know Mr. Gruden, I can't be late, can I go please?"

"Sure. Scram."

Gino walked past Rowell and gave The Boy a fake "Sorry, pal" look before disappearing down the hall. The Boy mentally saluted him, and made as if to follow, to no avail. Rowell held him back with a palm on the chest of his dungaree jacket. Rowell patted the chest pocket.

"What do we have here?" He smiled, unbuttoning the pocket and pulling out The Boy's rolling machine. He turned it over in his hands, squinting below a furrowed brow. "I think I'll just hang on to this, OK with you?"

"Gee, thanks Mr. Rowell. Can I go now? I got a test too."



Anybody who can write anything can write a book. If they actually applied themselves in high school and college and read a novel once in a while, it might even come out okay. As I said before, I had been a reader my whole life but had no education in writing or literature. I had 50,000 words, mostly in complete sentences, and some even forming compelling scenes. I am actually good at dialogue. The story is a good one:

"Alex Dean is a 40-year-old man with a loving wife, amazing daughter, and self-described C-minus life. He wakes up from anesthesia 25 years in the past with his teenage friends, including Chris, who had died the previous year but is somehow alive. Alex returns to the present and his life seems...better. He doesn't know if he changed something, or if the experi-

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

ence changed him. Then Chris shows up. He is alive, but he is a man out of place, “out of time,” and Alex has to return to the past and set things right.”

I think that’s a great book jacket blurb. It’s all the pages that are supposed to come before it that are the problem. I couldn’t have been specific, but I knew that, while I might have a good idea and parts of the draft might be okay, most of it needed work, work I didn’t know how to do or even name.

Not knowing how to proceed, I proceeded.

I started on page one and began what I later learned was line editing. Which isn’t how you revise a novel. Eventually I found an excellent novel revision course online. It’s really three courses, one for the developmental, or structural, revision, one for scene level revision, and the third was for line editing.

I learned that structurally I had included most of the necessary plot points, and they were pretty much where they belonged. Reading all those years paid off. Scene level revision is where I needed to actually re-write the words, but I didn’t know how to do that. The major issues throughout the draft were: too much abstraction and telling instead of showing, hardly any setting, and besides the main character there was hardly any character development. The course helped me to identify these problems, but there was an assumption that I, you know, knew how to write.

I saw a news story about a program called Mass ReConnect, a new program that made community college free for residents aged 25 or older who do not have a college degree. I enrolled at Middlesex Community College (MCC). At MCC I learned about everything I would need to revise my novel. That’s to say, I learned to identify the issues, and how to fix them, but that’s not to say I suddenly was proficient in doing so. In literature courses I saw examples of these techniques in the works we studied. In some courses, I was able apply what I had learned to revise parts of the novel. I graduated from MCC in May 2025, two months shy of my sixty-third birthday.



June 1980

The Boy rode his bike to the Junior High parking lot. He couldn’t have told you why. He was three credits short of the graduation requirements and Mr. Rowell told him not to bother showing up. He watched his classmates rush around, hugging, crying, straightening their caps and gowns. As it turned out he could have walked and got an empty diploma folder. But as payback for three years of being a delinquent pain in the ass, Rowell didn’t tell him that part.



Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

September 2025

I knew I was heading in the right direction and decided to continue my education at UMass Lowell. The writing program there is top notch, and I was familiar with two of the professors' works. I completed financial aid forms, applications, and transcript requests. Finally, I was admitted and was allowed to browse the courses for the fall semester. There were some courses I would clearly have to take for the English/Creative Writing degree program I enrolled in, so I had no problem selecting four to start with.

When you transfer to a four-year university and bring in credits from four prior schools, the report they give you is not simple. It's easy to see the total credits, but it gets tricky when trying to figure out which degree requirements you've met and which you need more credits in. I worked through it and met with an advisor to make sure I was heading in the right direction. I knew what requirements I had to complete to earn my degree and had a list of courses that would fill those requirements.

One September day I sat at my desk and tilted open my laptop. I opened up Microsoft Word, and a new document. I checked my notes on the table I wanted to make. You always make a small column on the left. You might need it for check marks or dates or something. On this table I wanted two more columns, each of three and a half inches. I needed four sections (for semesters) of six rows (for classes), with two rows separating the sections. I decided to spread it over two pages. I typed into the top row of the second column, "Course Name/Num," and in the third column, "Days/Times."

Over the next two hours, I planned my next two years at UMass Lowell. When I finished, I tried to imagine what those classes would be like. Contemporary American fiction, the Harlem Renaissance, something called a "Capstone Project."

The possibilities amaze me.