

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Christian Beck
All Apologies

High school was pure hell for me. Yeah, I know. That's a real original sentiment. But at the time, I didn't know how I would get out of there alive. Even after I somehow managed to survive, I stayed angry at just about everything, anything, and anyone connected to my high school years for a long, long time. Well, that was over half my lifetime ago. I'd say it's way past time to make peace with the past and put those demons to rest. So here goes.

Carbondale Community High School. Or, as my seventh grade English/social studies teacher had told us he and his friends called it way back when he went there...Carbondale Community Concentration Camp. That felt like a much more accurate description for me. I remember the theme for the yearbook from my senior year was, "Where Do You Fit In?" Uh... how about a resounding NOWHERE? I got decent grades, but I wasn't a superbrain. At least not by that school's standards. I sure as hell wasn't a jock. I even managed to get a P.E. waiver my senior year so I could at least be spared a little humiliation. And I definitely wasn't a stoner. I was just the quiet fat kid who always tried to sit in the back row and just wanted to be left alone...which only puts a bigger target on you. Especially where teachers are concerned. But this isn't about them.

Also...I was weird. Even by teenager standards. I'd always had a freakish memory, and I think it was sometime during my freshman year when I started to become obsessed with movies, and the Oscars in particular. So instead of experimenting with sex, drugs, or rock & roll, I spent my "wonder years" memorizing all the winners and most of the nominees in Oscar history. Not exactly average Joe, huh?

Finally, The End came. June 4, 1993. Graduation at Southern Illinois University Arena. My parents were in the midst of separating, but my father had just come back from Siberia the night before so he could attend. No, seriously. He'd really been in Siberia, working on some project for the university. He even brought me back a weird-smelling T-shirt from Vladivostok.

There was also an event scheduled after graduation called SeniorFest. I believe it started out at the mall's food court for dinner, then on to this club called Coo Coo's at the local bowling alley for...whatever. Ostensibly, it was to keep kids from spending the whole night getting trashed, but it was really sold as the opportunity for all the seniors to spend one last night together. Since I found that idea repulsive, I had no intention of going.

Jenny Crane had other ideas. She was on the SeniorFest committee, and she would be in the library at lunchtime getting people to sign up to attend. Since I never had any appetite for lunch while I was at school, I spent my lunch period in the library every day. When Jenny tried to get me to sign up for SeniorFest, instead of politely yet firmly declining, I had to turn it into a daily ever-escalating argument that culminated with me signing my name to one of the sheets...then immediately ripping it up. Definitely one of my asshole moments. Especially since she was one of the

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few people in high school who was always nice to me. Jenny ultimately forged my signature on one of the sign-up sheets, so I did end up on the list of Fest-goers. When the argument fired up again on graduation night while we were all lining up in one of the arena's corridors, Jenny insisted to me, "Oh, fargle. You're going." More on that later.

And then it was time for commencement to...well...commence. The 180 or so people in my class filed into the arena. The teachers stomped in looking incredibly bored, no doubt dreading the prospect of having to sit through one of these damn things yet again.

I remember hearing Elsie Tompkins harrumph about the chorus, "They better do 'End of the Road.'" Lo and behold, they did. And even back then, I couldn't stand Boyz II Men. I remember Carbondale's mayor pontificating in his speech about how wonderful it was that both the school and the town were so "multi-ethnic." See, even at graduation, we were still learning new words...that may or may not exist. Then there was our class speaker, Chad Knight, the brilliant-popular-athletic-good-looking-Homecoming-King-type, who noted in his speech that "as a class," we had "survived the Vanilla Ice, Gerardo, and New Kids on the Block scares." I seem to remember hearing some rumor that Chad had gotten accepted to Harvard, then turned them down to go to a Bible college in Arkansas instead, but I have no idea if that was actually true.

When it was my turn to walk across the stage, I think it was actually my longtime dentist—who was on the school board at the time—who handed me my diploma. Well, diploma holder. We didn't get our actual diplomas until we turned in our caps and gowns. Like I'd really try to abscond with either of those.

At any rate, when the thing was finally over, I dutifully threw my cap into the air, along with everybody else. Leanne Slater and Marley Hunt hugged me. Curt Eckert tried to hug me. I think I halfheartedly patted his back, but that was all I could manage. Doug Gunderson looked at me and asked, "Now what?" Good question. Still don't know the answer.

Of course, the night wouldn't have been complete without one dark moment of panic. When I went to claim my diploma, the mindless petty bureaucrat in charge of that chore demanded to know where my cap was. He even threatened not to fork over my diploma until I produced it. "I threw it," I sputtered. Along with everybody else, I should have added. Finally, he took pity on me and picked up a nearby cap, checked it off as mine, and handed me my diploma, probably just to get rid of me. Story of my life.

As much as I hated, loathed, and despised high school, I wasn't the least bit excited about graduation, or at the prospect of getting out of there. I didn't feel any sense of accomplishment. The feeling I remember the most from that night in the arena was the relief that I would never, ever have to see any of those people ever again. That turned out to not be entirely true. I had classes in college with a few of them, and there have been a few random encounters over the years. Like when I went to renew my driver's license and ran into Sherry Williams with her baby. She told me, "You gotta get one of these. They're so much fun." Thanks...but I'm trying to cut down. More recently, Sean Messer actually set foot in my

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house when his mother sent him and his wife over to consider adopting one of the cats who had moved into my carport. They ended up declining. Their loss, right?

But for the most part, graduation was the last time I saw many of them. I didn't even say goodbye to anyone. I just went home with my parents, ate a piece of cake, and went to bed. Seemed like the easiest solution for everyone. Especially me.

So I didn't go to SeniorFest. Later on, Mitch Wald's mother told my mother that Mitch had told her I won a big-screen TV in some kind of raffle they had. Guess you had to be there in person to collect because I sure as hell never got any damn TV. "I wonder why they didn't just draw names from the kids who were actually there," my mom grouched. I just played dumb...gee, I don't know...I don't know anything about any forms with my signature forged on them...nice weather we're having, isn't it?

I'm sure if I had actually been there, I wouldn't have won anything. I would've been standing in a corner, looking at my watch, counting the minutes until I could go home. But for not showing up...I win a big-screen TV. Again...story of my life.

So what ever became of the class of '93? Despite my near total burning of bridges, I did pick up a few bits and pieces over the years. Angela Horowitz won a Pulitzer Prize as part of the team of reporters who outed the governor of New Jersey. Todd Gamborelli became a documentary filmmaker. At one time, I used to see April Buchanan as a reporter on the local TV station. Damian Little was killed in a car accident just a couple years after graduation. Maria Herten died several years later, but I don't know what the cause was. A few others were frequent guests of the state.

And then came Facebook. It took me a long time to finally cave and get on there. Once I did, I still swore up and down that I wouldn't contact anyone from high school. Mainly because I'm still mortified by the way I acted back then. But I did manage to find out some information through my surfing...OK, stalking. Randy Frazier became a government lawyer, even using a picture of himself with Obama as his profile picture. Scott Rudiger went to L.A. and became an animation editor, which I thought was really cool because getting into animation had always been his dream. Eventually, I did cave again and "friended" a few people from my class, partly out of curiosity...and partly because I realized there actually were a few people I wanted to at least check in with. Who knew?

I guess I was able to do that because enough time had finally passed. Just a couple years after graduation, it was a much different story. I was in college, but still living at home. I think it was over Christmas break, about 11:00 one night, and I was in bed reading when the phone rang. My mom grumpily hollered that it was for me. When I went to answer it, the voice said, "Hey, it's Evan Oliver."

"Who?" I asked, perhaps a bit more harshly than I intended.

"Evan Oliver."

"Oh. Hey." Translation: why are you calling me at 11 PM when I haven't spoken to you in over two years?

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"You going to SIU?"

"Yeah."

"Still living at home?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. Hey, I'm having a party over here, and was hoping you could come."

Huh? What the hell? "I don't think so," I finally mumbled.

"There's a lot of people from high school here."

Like that was supposed to be an incentive? "I don't think so," I muttered again. I don't remember how the conversation wrapped up...I was too baffled from receiving this invitation so totally out of the blue. At the time, I turned it down because of my nagging suspicion that Evan—or whoever may have suggested it to him—only tried to get me there so they could make fun of me. But that was probably just paranoia. Probably. There was another question that nagged at me: why now? Why was I invited to this particular party when none of them ever invited me to any parties when we were actually in high school? I don't know. Maybe he thought of me because he and John Stark were also there when I'd had to go to traffic school that summer, due to a minor vehicular incident I'd been involved in...OK, that I'd caused. But they hadn't talked to me that night, either.

All right, this is starting to sound way too much like a pity party, and that is definitely not what I want. Moving on...I recently dug out my yearbooks for the first time in eons, and when I opened the one from senior year, on the very first page of the table of contents, I found this quote from Holly Wexler: "I'm really going to miss high school. I enjoyed the atmosphere and the social activities it offered. But most of all, I'll miss all my friends, most of which I would never of met if it wasn't for high school." Say what? That was when I fully realized that, at least emotionally, I hadn't even been on the same planet as my classmates. Let alone at the same school.

After graduation, I did make one final trip to the high school. Since my grandparents hadn't been able to attend, my mom decided to order the official "senior video," so they could at least watch the ceremony. At least that was the theory. I picked up the tape from the library, and I watched it once, but then I think I threw it away. Too bad. I'm sure it made me nauseous to watch it back then, but I think it would be hilarious to see it now. In addition to graduation, there was also a montage of everyone's yearbook photos while schmaltzy songs like Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" and Madonna's "This Used to Be My Playground" played on the soundtrack. Wrong on both counts. Some of the hijinks from SeniorFest were featured in the video, too. But no shot of me accepting my big-screen TV prize, alas.

I didn't pay much attention to music back then, but once I did, I always felt like Nirvana managed to capture exactly the feeling of being in high school in the early '90s. Or at least, how high school in the early '90s felt for me. Whenever I fantasized about writing a screenplay for my own

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high school movie, I always imagined it opening with a montage of kids in the hallways set to “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” And I’ve said for years that I want “All Apologies” played at my funeral. The refrain at the end of “All Apologies” – coincidentally released the same year I graduated – perfectly sums up how I now feel about all those people I thought I hated, and who I thought hated me right back. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, Google it...I don’t need Courtney Love’s lawyers coming after me for copyright infringement. I do owe apologies to plenty of my classmates, and to at least a couple people who graduated the previous year. Several of you tried to be decent to me, and I didn’t make it easy. Putting it mildly. But I also owe apologies to myself. I wasn’t very good to myself back then, either.

I know I’ve barely scratched the surface here, but here’s what it’s only taken me twenty years to figure out. Yes, high school was a godawful, horrible, fucked-up nightmare...but it was a hell of a long time ago. None of those people can ever do anything to me again. I can’t do anything to them. As it should be.

I still have one question, though. What ever happened to that TV I supposedly won?