

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

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Reinvented

Kevin was retirement age when he finally realized that he didn't know everything. This realization came rather slowly, and he wondered why that was. He had thought of himself as a reflective person, a self-aware person, a "woke" person. Yet now he speculated on how much better of a person he would have been if he had had a healthy dose of self-doubt.

This critical look in the mirror came as he started to clean out his home office. Thirty-five years as a high school history teacher leaves files upon files of articles, resources, lesson plans, personal evaluations, and precious notes from students whose lives he had influenced. Living alone, the files occupied more than his office. Like suckers on an aspen tree, they grew in the extra bedroom with its closets, down into the basement rec room, and even in the attached garage. Then there were the shelves upon shelves of books, some publisher's samples, many never read because he knew his subject matter, or at least enough to teach the high school curriculum and Advanced Placement course.

Being at the early stages of this clean-up, Kevin was perusing every folder determining if it was worth keeping in case he went back as a sub. His co-worker, Joan, had warned him of this, told him just toss; you will never miss it, and it's all available online if you do. Joan had retired at 55, turning her home office into a weaving room. Kevin, of course, didn't heed her advice.

Now he started in a file titled China. He remembered telling his students the US would never trade with China unless it gave up its communist chatter. Guess he got that wrong. Another one simply marked Trump he tossed without even a glance inside. Well, lots of people miscalled that one.

Here in the Colonial World folder was a year's worth of lesson plans he had used from 1990 to 1998. Lots about the sugar triangle; nothing about the silver trade between Spain, Bolivia and China, which he had recently learned of. He exonerated himself. He did have to teach to the curriculum and it wasn't his fault it was US-centric.

After the second week without making a dent in the 12 four-drawer file cabinets plus boxes, he moved the recycling bin into the garage just outside the kitchen door and began to toss.

Kevin was a loner, or so he told himself when he wondered why he didn't have any close friends. He liked to read when he wasn't busy with the extra-curricular activities at school – chess club, debate, Model U.N. He worked with mostly women, so in-school-friendships stayed in-school. Joan was probably what they call your "work wife" these days. The one who enlisted him in extra department work and who listened to all of his ideas on how the school could be made more efficient, what should happen with the computing system, how discipline should be handled by the assistant principal who was now a woman and could be played by these students, and the many grants the principle failed to apply for. Joan, not being a real wife, never questioned him, nor did the other staff members.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

They had better things to do than argue with someone who never changed his mind.

In the realm of his workplace, Kevin was confident and assured. Fact-check him on anything, which he encouraged his students to do, and you'd find he was right. In all his years, he received very good to excellent ratings on his teaching. Being a large man with a booming voice and expressive manner, his students seldom fell asleep in his class. If they did, he quickly shifted into some role-play between two historic figures making the dozing youth one of them.

"Think, think!" he would scream. "What would Hamilton have said? Come on, we watched the musical."

Kevin assured parents that he had been teaching long enough that any student who came his way would be corralled into learning. He didn't need them to tell him about the childhood trauma, "We all experience trauma of some kind. Try having him meditate." Dyslexia, "It'll take him longer to do the test, so I can give him extra time, but then he has to come take it after school or the other kids will complain." Truancy, "Reward good behavior, punish bad. Pavlov's dogs." Parenting was a skill, learned like any other one. He knew, he was a parent himself; although he didn't mention it had become part-time after his divorce when his daughter was seven.

Kevin thought of himself as a helper, a fixer. When someone came to him with a problem, he assumed the responsibility of fixing it, even when the person was just venting and didn't ask for help. He learned from his ex-wife that this was a common male trait, so there must be nothing wrong with it.

Quickly glancing through a folder of newspaper clippings, Kevin's eye caught a photo of Monique James. Dated July 29, 2014, she was in her cap and gown, a school photo holding up her diploma. Monique had been a quiet girl who sat in the back, never spoke unless spoken to, sullen in the photo as she had been in school. An average student who got her work in, sometimes late, and missed more classes than she should have, usually Mondays. He remembered the headline without having to unfold the scrap of newsprint, "Woman kills man in sex trafficking case." This had been going on while she was in his classroom. He looked at her face for a long time. What was the outcome of her case? Surely, she was acquitted, but he seemed to remember some controversy. He'd have to follow up. Kevin's arm reached out to place it in the trash box, then he pulled back and paged through the rest of it. At least a dozen others had died by violence or taken someone's life. The piece about Monique was the last one he had saved, although not the last he knew of.

Kevin took the folder with him. It was dusk, and he poured himself a double Scotch. Instead of sitting down to watch the news, as he usually did, he sat in the sun porch looking into the back yard. A few birds were at the feeder. He watched them pick at the seeds and each other. There was place and food for them all, yet they kept each other at a safe distance. Did all birds have a pecking order, he wondered. When one in a flock is hurt do they help or harm the injured? Did all kinds of birds act the same?

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Now that he had time, he'd be more careful in his observations. Maybe even read up on it so he knew what to look for.

After a month, Kevin's daily task lessened to a couple of hours a day with weekends off. The office was nearing the completion, so he started on the spare bedroom. Here was the file cabinet marked personal.

Tax forms. A quick online check told him only three years was needed. He hauled the box containing the past twenty since his divorce into the living room. He'd have to shred them, which he could do watching TV. Child support payments. Jessica was 33, that ended long ago. He pulled out a fat folder filled with art work. Jessica's from the weekends she stayed with him. Hearts with I Love You Daddy, rainbows and butterflies, then more sophisticated drawings, still-lives, horses, dogs. Kevin thought to ask her if she still draws or draws with his granddaughter, Madison. Maybe they could do that together.

There was a note written on a page torn from a black composition notebook.

"Dear Daddy, I want you to know that I do love you. But it is hard when you and Mom are always arguing, especially when it is about me. I am OK, Daddy. Mom is doing a good job of raising me. It is not like you think. I have rules that she makes me follow. I also have good judgement. I know how to keep myself safe. I don't use drugs. I don't hang around with people who use drugs. And Mom doesn't either. I hate it when you shout at her. Please, please, can you just talk."

Kevin barely remembered getting this letter. There was no date on it, but from her handwriting, he's have guessed she was in middle school. It was probably about this time she said she didn't want to come for weekends anymore. Their visits became Friday night dinner out, unless she had a basketball game in which case Kevin would go watch. He wondered if Jessica would be open to a conversation about this. He so wanted to go back to the time when she was little, and they were close. But Jessica had married Brandon, a boy Kevin had taught and never liked because he was opinionated and argumentative.

That night he called Jessica and got an invitation to go to her house Sunday for brunch. He picked up some art supplies for Madison hoping they would have time to play. He decided to try his best to improve his relationship with Brandon, mostly because he wanted to be welcome into their household. Brandon explained supply chain issues, and Kevin realized he knew nothing about the topic and thanked Brandon for informing him. When he helped Jessica with clean-up, he mentioned the letter. She didn't remember writing it, but he asked if that was what she had been feeling.

"Dad," she said. "You were hard on Mom. That's why you got divorced. But as for me, I grew up in a world of divorced kids. Slumber parties were full of talk about parents fighting and step-parents, and live-in boyfriends who were creeps. You and Mom weren't the worst. Yes, you could have been better, but teachers always neglect their own kids. And Mark had his kids, so he wasn't competing with you as step-dad. Water under the bridge, Dad. Don't beat yourself up." She gave him a quick kiss

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

on the cheek. Kevin wondered if he had avoided relationships by taking on extra duties after school. He sat down to draw with Madison.

After a few months, Kevin thought he'd get in touch with some of his colleagues who had also retired. Although he was still cleaning out the house, he knew he needed to enter the world of humans again before he started drinking earlier in the day than he was already doing. He heard from Joan that a group met Mondays at a coffee shop and joined them. The seats alongside Joan were taken, and he stood there awkwardly with no one particularly welcoming him to the table. "I'll go get a coffee," he said, looking at Joan for help. When he returned a chair had been squeezed up at the end next to Bill Waverly who had been retired so long that Kevin had hardly worked with him at all.

It was an awkward start and continued to be awkward. Kevin realized how little he knew these people, even though he had worked with some of them for almost 30 years. As he listened, he learned two of them had overcome cancer while they were teaching and a third had lost his wife. Kevin remembered the funeral. Yes, he did go to that, so he knew. He listened to the conversation and wondered where he had been while these friendships were forming. Why had no one reached out to him? They didn't even have a retirement party. Did the others? He remembered getting invitations in his mail box, but not attending any or throwing any money in.

When they left, he walked with Joan to her house just a few blocks away. He didn't know how to ask, but she was the only one who could give him some insight.

"Joan," he said preparing himself. "I want an honest answer. Do you think I'm weird?"

Joan snorted a laugh. "All male teachers are weird," she said. "If they aren't weird when they start, they are weird when they finish. Why do you ask?" She waited for an answer and when it didn't come, went on. "Kevin, it is hard to retire. It takes time to find yourself again. And you got to get over the stress of teaching. I think we all have a case of PTSD. Working there was hard. The students have hard lives. We take it in. That's why I got my loom."

"But those guys all seem to be friends. Why wasn't I part of that?" Kevin's voice was so soft that Joan's heart went out to him.

Joan took a deep breath, "Because you never needed them, Kevin." She touched his arm. "You don't make room." He looked away. She hesitated but then gently continued. "And Kevin, you don't like listening. A conversation is two people, each talking. You like to dominate the room." He looked down at his shoes like a ten-year-old. "I'm sorry, Kevin, but good friends help each other be better people. And I am your good friend." They were at her house now. "Come again. You did good at keeping quiet this time. Come and try it again." She smiled and walked up her sidewalk. Kevin thought how lucky Joan's husband was.

Kevin didn't go for coffee again. Joan called after two weeks and apologized if she had hurt his feelings. No, he said, that wasn't why. He just didn't have the time. He was busy with a project. She knew he was lying because Kevin always bragged about his projects.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Work takes the amount of time in which you have to do it, Kevin often said. With more time, he took a lot longer with household chores and spent a lot of time thinking. That was painful. Things came up. He began to feel an insecurity he hadn't felt since high school. You don't make room, Joan had said. The file cabinets were empty now and hauled to Goodwill. The books taken to the library resale shop. Room is what he had.