

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

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Academic High

It was 1968, Jimmy was 16 when his mother came home from a vacation with his brother and sister in Nova Scotia and announced "we're moving." She had driven past a house with a barn, a woodshed, a chicken coop, 100 acres (more or less) and a "for sale" sign for \$6000. She wrote a check on the spot. Jimmy could see his future plans going up in smoke. They argued and the compromise was that she would put off moving for a year if he would visit West Pictou High School and see for himself.

A month later they drove back to Nova Scotia and he got to see the house she'd bought for the first time. It was a bit ramshackle, larger than their house in New Canaan but heated only by an enormous wood stove in the kitchen and a small oil stove on the second floor landing. They camped in the living room. There was a chill in the late August evening air but the woodshed was full and the stove in the kitchen threw off both heat and the comforting scent of a hardwood fire.

Jimmy had loved wandering the forests and meadows of Connecticut and he began to think he might enjoy Nova Scotia too. The next day they went to visit West Pictou High School. The building was a bit smaller than New Canaan High School but newer if a bit less polished. The headmaster (which is what the Canadians call principals) was friendly as they wandered the building. He was proud of his hockey and curling teams. There was a football team too but it was Canadian football he reminded everyone. Jimmy wasn't interested. All he cared about was the academics. It had to fit his plan.

Jimmy love learning but he hated schools. His academic career had been filled with bull headed confrontations with intellectually dishonest academics. He was sick most of first grade, missing over a month of school, enough that his parents had to fight to keep him from *not* staying back. Still, he learned to read and loved it. In second grade they put him in the dunce class, those who should have stayed back but had parents who, like his, insisted he progress. Most of the second grade was concerned with arithmetic, which he easily mastered, and remedial reading which he fought tooth and nail. It wasn't that Jimmy didn't like reading, he did. It was just that he hated spending time reading, "See Tom run," when he could be reading, "The red rocket flew out of sight." The reading curriculum was centered around something called the SRA Reading Kit which consisted of color coded books that were intended to be read progressively from red through green to purple following the colors of the rainbow. While the class was stuck on red, which Jimmy found boring, he would read the violet colored books which were far more interesting but proscribed by the teacher as far to advanced. Needless to say his teacher couldn't understand why he was unable or unwilling to get with the program. Why should he? Her program put him to sleep or at best made his attention drift off to events happening outside the window or beyond. Today he would be diagnosed with ADHD and he would have been dumbed down with drugs but in the 1960's they had the school psychologist and Jimmy was obliged to see her once or twice a week.

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When he'd had enough adult badgering he'd throw a temper tantrum. He was honest, he would tell the teacher exactly why she was awful, he was bored to tears. As punishment he would be sent to the library, where not only would quiet be enforced but they had books like "What is a Rocket?" He had little reason to be compliant when he could spend hours reading *real* books at the library.

He survived second grade and moved on to the third grade dunce class, managed, not taught, by a Dr. Zimmer. Dr. Zimmer was a very patient woman who specialized in discovering the differing learning styles of her *disabled* students. She prodded him, tested him and challenged him and in a month she decided that he was a genius rather than the dunce everyone else thought he was. She wanted to bump him up to fourth grade over the Christmas vacation but for some reason Jimmy's parents freaked. He wasn't sure why they were against moving him to fourth grade but instead he was moved to the advanced third grade class where he soon found himself buried and at the bottom ... again. Each desk had an old upright typewriter and every student was expected to type their papers. Miss Allen a very nice but strict disciplinarian was completely unwilling to cut Jimmy any slack. He couldn't type, he couldn't spell and his cursive was unreadable. He went from being the darling to the dunce again.

Back in the library he discovered the Encyclopedia Britannica and resolved to read all 29 volumes cover to cover. He didn't read every word of course but, rather, he learned to scan the volumes quickly, page by page, until an article tickled his fancy. Then he'd read the article in detail. He left a bookmark in the volume he was reading at the time and in his remaining three years of elementary school no one ever touched or moved the bookmark.

Fourth and fifth grade tainted his attitude towards school forever. There were four classes of 30-40 kids each. There was the fast track, bound for a good college class, the local college bound class, the kids who would graduate from High School with effort class and the dunces. He was put in the good enough for a local college class which was taught by a Miss Jensen who made it her mission to break the little shit who questioned everything. Jimmy made it his mission to resist and to outwit her if he could.

When the class studied Egypt that fall he made sure that he read and understand whatever the simplistic textbook said and he made it a point to read all the Encyclopedia entries he could find on ancient Egypt and to read every other book in the library that might be relevant. In his parents library he found and read "Gods, Graves and Scholars" by C. W. Ceram which covered early archaeology from Mesopotamia through Greece. He knew more about that period and the methods the scholars used than Miss Jensen did. He also knew what the questions were that the text book conveniently left unasked or unanswered and he pointedly asked those questions in class, often rhetorically. He was a major pain in the neck but he remained enthralled by knowledge and unwilling to put up with fools, that is, Miss Jensen. The school sent him to a psychiatrist who said there was nothing wrong with him.

It was a relief to move on to fifth grade until he got his class assignment letter. Miss Jensen had moved up to fifth grade too and had requested him for her class. It was all out war. She retired after that and became a

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librarian while Jimmy was marked as a troublemaker and put back on the “will make it out of High School with difficulty” track.

Back at the library he discovered both physics and philosophy. The first explained the physical universe while the second explained everything else. He loved the paradoxes of philosophy and loved learning the why and how of physics. In his own mind they were one and the same and he was thrilled to learn that during the enlightenment physics was called *natural philosophy*. He resolved to become a natural philosopher. To become a physicist he had to become both a philosopher and a mathematician. That realization set him on the path he found himself on when his mother announced that they were moving to Canada.

His plan as it emerged from fifth grade was very simple: to take Introduction to Algebra in 7th grade which would allow him to take Algebra I in 8th grade which would allow him to take Advanced Placement Calculus as a senior in high school which would also allow him to take Advanced Placement Physics ... which, no doubt, would get him into someplace like MIT.... It was a simple plan and, going into 6th grade, it was a plan that looked quite feasible.

But Jimmy got bored easily and a teacher droning on and on about something that didn't interest him put him to sleep or at least placed him in a Zombie state, immune from all external stimulus. Arithmetic in 6th grade was one of those things. He knew arithmetic, he knew it cold by 3rd grade. Adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing were just not that hard to learn. So while his 6th grade teacher was lecturing them on arithmetic he was secretly reading his own copy of “Science News” purchased with money he earned on his paper route. On arithmetic tests he'd get bored after the first ten questions, to keep himself amused and to demonstrate his knowledge he would invent his own, more complicated questions and answer those instead.

Jimmy was told that he wasn't ready for Introduction to Algebra in 7th grade and that he would have to take arithmetic again. No fuckin' way! Jimmy enrolled in Summer School and in 4 weeks passed Algebra I. He still had to take Arithmetic in seventh grade so the next summer he took Algebra II and passed it.

In 9th grade they made him take Algebra I again so the next summer he took the GED test. If they weren't going to play fair neither was he. Without telling anyone at New Canaan High School he enrolled at the University of Connecticut at Stamford. Anyone with a GED could enroll at UCONN without taking the SAT's. They assumed that everyone with a GED was older and going back to school after having dropped out of high school so they made it easy to go to college.

Because Jimmy was still in high school (he didn't consider UCONN a serious college or the GED a serious equivalent to a *real* high school diploma) and had a job delivering newspapers, the only classes he could take were in the evening. Two nights a week he would hop the train to Stamford for classes beginning at 6 O'clock and ending at 10. His high school grades suffered but he didn't care, he was already in college.

His mother was in on his scheme and for a time approved. His father had died when he was in 6th grade and for 2 years he fed the family from

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his paper route while his mother went to secretarial school. By the time he was a sophomore in high school and a freshman at UCONN she was the secretary to the superintendent of schools. Her status gave her unnatural access to his teachers and somehow the game was unmasked.

Needless to say all hell broke loose. He was told to withdraw from UCONN and refused at first demanding to know on what the grounds? It was pointed out that he had lied about his age when he took the GED test, you were supposed to be at least 19. In the end UCONN refunded his tuition and he withdrew but not before one of his college teachers offered him a job as an apprentice computer programmer on a big IBM mainframe computer.

The high school also relented and allowed him to “catch up” his junior year by taking both Trigonometry and Algebra II at the same time. That would make him eligible for AP Physics and AP Calculus when he was a senior. Life was good, his plan was back on track; his gambit had worked. That was at the end of his Sophomore year. A few days after school ended, after the teachers had turned in their grades and the schools had been shut down for the summer his mother went on vacation to Nova Scotia with his brother and sister.

Jimmy had stayed home because he had three jobs that summer. In the morning he would ride his bike the couple of miles to the Country Club to caddy. Around 3pm he'd be back at home where Dominick, a man dumb-struck by too many years of breathing the fumes of molten lead, would pick him up in his truck and they'd deliver newspapers to all the paperboys in town as well as the 150 customers Jimmy had on his own route. Jimmy had tried to give up the route but delivering papers was going out of style and no new paperboys could be found so the Stamford Advocate gave him his own driver, Dominick. When they were done delivering newspapers Jimmy would grab a bite to eat then head to the train station for the ride into Stamford where he worked in the documentation department of a company called NCSS, the company that owned the worlds largest IBM mainframe then in commercial use. He'd be home by 11pm or stay late and “play” with his giant computer.

Taking ten days off to go visit West Pictou High School was a big deal. He had to tell the caddy-master that he was going to miss two weekends, the caddy-master wasn't happy, and he had to take an unearned vacation from NCSS and convince Dominick that he could deliver the papers without him. In the end Jimmy convinced another paperboy to ride shotgun.

When the tour of West Pictou High School was over Jimmy found himself sitting in the headmasters office asking questions about their academics. The headmaster was surprised, shocked, and had to scramble to answer Jimmy's questions. Most new students wanted to know about the ranking of the hockey team not the caliber of the mathematics faculty. It became quickly apparent that West Pictou High School would be a total waste of Jimmy's time. Trigonometry was as far as the math curriculum went and only in a fifth year and since he would be a new student they would insist that he take Geometry ... again. Worse still, Canadian high schools didn't put much trust in the academic performance of high schools in the United States, so he would be required to take a fifth year anyway before he could graduate from West Pictou High School and move on to

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any Canadian college. The fact that he had already graduated from high school by virtue of his GED did nothing for their inflexible rules. Jimmy stood up, looked at his mother and said, "There is no way in hell I'm moving here." She looked peevish but agreed.

Back in New Canaan he aced Algebra II and Trigonometry but hated taking Biology II which was part of the requisite progression in the sciences. He hadn't thought of that, he was interested in Physics not Biology and because he wanted to really understand the articles in his subscription to "Physical Review Letters" he spent his free time studying a college level calculus textbook not doing Biology homework. He never talked about his mother's anticipated move to Nova Scotia and in his innocence he hoped that she would treat the house in Poplar Hill as a summer cottage, at least until he got out of high school.

Sometime in mid April disaster struck. The water main feeding their house broke somewhere along its 600 foot run through three other properties.

They lived in a little cottage nestled at the back of the rump of his grandfathers once grand estate. During the Depression his grandfather had developed and sold off lots as needed for cash. Their house had once been the coachman's cottage. What passed for their living room had been a garage for the horse drawn coach. His parents bedroom was once the tack room with hooks on every wall. Upstairs was a small three room apartment where the coachman had lived and in the basement there were two horse stalls and a coal burning furnace long since converted to oil but with coal still in the bunker. Jimmy ran 300 feet of garden hose from "the big house" to the cottage to provide them with water but it wasn't legal and wouldn't last the winter and the contractor for the town said it would cost \$10,000 to replace the underground pipe. They were moving to Nova Scotia, like it or not, as soon as his mother could arrange it.

Jimmy was depressed and stomped around the house, *not* wanting to go, his life was ruined, etc. Sometime in mid June, when they were slowly emptying the house of items that were not going to Canada his mother had an idea. Many of her childhood friends still lived in New Canaan and many of them still lived in huge, more or less empty, mansions. Surely one of them could rent a room to Jimmy while he finished High School.

That proved easy to arrange and the week his mother, brother and sister left for Canada Jimmy moved into the empty servants quarters of one of the older "summer cottages" build at the turn of the 20th century. The house belonged to Mrs. "O" as they called her, who inherited it from her mother who inherited it from her father who was a friend of Jimmy's Great Grandfather. Mrs. "O" was born into a wealthy Greek shipping family. Her mansion was next to Jimmy's grandfathers original mansion on Weed Street which was next door to the Watson (the founder of IBM) estate. It was a very toney neighborhood. Mrs. "O" had married Bill an eccentric MIT educated *gnurd* (MIT spelling) who worked on radar during the Second World War but was very much retired. Mrs. "O" had money, Bill had married it.

Jimmy's "rent" was to keep Bill occupied, which meant, keep him out of everyone's hair. Bill would meddle in everything and express his

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haughty opinion about virtually any subject in lectures that were long, incomprehensible and filled with flying spittle. Jimmy loved science and engineering and Bill considered himself to be a world class scientist and engineer, which he may have been ... once. So Jimmy became, much to his dismay, Bills adopted son since Bill had only fathered four non-scientist daughters all older than Jimmy and mostly out of the house.

Bill had a theory that trees had something resembling a nervous system and that he could tap into their slow moving brain by pounding nails into every tree in his front yard. Actually Jimmy was the one who pounded nails into every tree in the front yard while Bill talked continuously. They ran wires from the trees to the house and down into Bills laboratory deep in the basement where the coal bin once stood. Bill had built a display panel full of small galvanometers which showed the voltage potential between the nail in a tree and a large copper stake hammered into the ground and connected to the houses plumbing. He had discovered that the voltage changed whenever a storm passed nearby and the experiment Jimmy and Bill were conducting would show that all trees, not just maples, behaved the same way. No kidding thought Jimmy, what you've got in your front yard is a forest of lightning rods. It was fun to see the voltage slowly rise as a storm approached but by previous agreement Mrs. "O" would call Jimmy upstairs for one made-up reason or another as soon as any thunder was heard. They left Bill in the basement taking notes and muttering to himself.

Until this point in his life Jimmy had been an outcast. Not an outcast exactly, that requires effort, but rather since he wasn't part of the in-crowd he had been largely ignored by all but his own small circle of science oriented acquaintances. That changed much to Jimmy's surprise as soon as word got out that he had his own apartment.

Friends he didn't know he had would drop by unannounced to smoke pot or pop pills in the attic apartment on the 4th floor of Mrs. "O's" house. Until that summer Jimmy had smoked pot, maybe, twice and both times it had put him to sleep which was not a lot of incentive to continue. However a stream of lascivious hippy chicks was more than enough incentive. Soon drug deals were conducted in the apartment and as a courtesy, retail drug dealers are the most courteous people on earth, Jimmy would be allowed to skim off the top. Since he wasn't interested in most of the drugs passing through he'd give things like speed and mescaline away keeping only some of the pot for himself.

More than once people would show up in the middle of the night wanting to party. He'd let them and, more than once, some hippy chick would crawl into bed with him and whisper, "Ya wana ball?" Of course he did, he was 17 years old and it was 1969. The summer went by quickly.

When school started in the fall Jimmy was excited. He had spent the last 6 years preparing for this and was finally going to be able to take all the Advanced Placement science and math classes he had been dreaming of since 5th grade. He was on his way to MIT or at least Harvard. He walked in on registration day filled with excitement and anticipation ready to pick up his class assignments and fix any errors.

There was an error, a grievous error, AP Physics was not on his sched-

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ule replaced with some computer class he cared nothing about. He went to the science department desk immediately. No there was no mistake. He was the only student eligible to take AP Physics so they cancelled the class. He was lucky, they said, because there were still 5 students that had signed up for AP Calculus. It was to be taught by Dr. Littlefield, a septuagenarian known by all to be suffering from Senile Dementia. One by one students dropped the class. By December Jimmy was the only one left when the class was finally cancelled and Dr. Littlefield retired. By then Jimmy had applied to MIT, Harvard, Tufts, Northeastern and BU. By March he had been rejected by MIT, Harvard, Tufts, Northeastern and BU.

His life was in ruin. There was nothing left but to buy a motorcycle, get high and ride, ride, ride. Jimmy didn't bother going to his graduation or the prom. He was disgusted with academics and New Canaan academics in particular. He quit all of his jobs.

On the day of his high school graduation he packed everything he owned that wouldn't fit on the back of his motorcycle in an old wooden crate for safe keeping in Mrs. "O's" attic. Then he slowly drove by the football field where graduation was taking place and honked his horn until a hundred eyes were looking in his direction. Then, slowly and deliberately, he took off his helmet and raised his arm so that his outstretched middle finger was clearly visible to all. When the murmur of approval or disapproval, as the case may have been, died down and the public address system began broadcasting the names of graduating seniors again he put his helmet back on, fired up his motorcycle and left New Canaan forever.

Somewhere north of Portsmouth New Hampshire Jimmy was finishing breakfast at a tumbledown roadhouse when the roar of 50 Harley's shook the building as they rumbled past. Jimmy gave chase. They roared up U.S. Route 1 together gaining some riders, losing some and eventually, when the last rider peeled off somewhere near Brunswick Maine, Jimmy was alone.

He crossed the Canadian boarder at Houghton Maine and spent the summer riding all over the Maritime Provinces and, probably for the first time in his life, enjoying not having to do *anything*. There was still the possibility of the military draft back in the states but that was still 6 months in the future and he could always move to Canada if he needed to. He had the Canadian equivalent of a Green Card. That was one reason his mother had moved to there, to keep her sons out of the draft.

In September it got cold in Canada so Jimmy headed to Cambridge Massachusetts even though he had no school to attend and no place to live. He slept in dormitories that had been turned into hippy communes and in an MIT fraternity that had a few empty bunks and kept himself amused by "auditing" whatever class at MIT or Harvard appealed to him. He lead a life halfway between a street urchin and impoverished undergraduate. It was fun ... until the money ran out and he was thrown off campus by the MIT police. *To be continued ...*