

Firekeepers

“Mr. Smith, repeat what you said to the rest of the class,” Ms. Linacre said.

“Uh... I...”

“Go on, if it was so important to lean over and tell Mr. Henne during our reading, please share it with the rest of us.”

I looked back and forth between my 8th grade English teacher, Ms. Linacre, and my friend, Nate Henne. *Don't say what you actually told me, you idiot*, his face said. For the life of me, I couldn't weave the right lie in my head.

“Go *on*,” she said. “Based on Mr. Henne's giggles, I expect it to be quite funny.”

“Um...”

“Mr. Smith, you can repeat yourself or lose credit for the day.”

“Love looks not with the eyes, but thine *boner*,” I said. For whatever reason, I also delivered it with an English accent.

My eighth-grade classmates howled. Nate Henne shook his head, wide-eyed in disbelief. Ms. Linacre kept a stony impression amidst the laughter. I still lay awake sometimes, now pushing forty years of age, and recall the event while wanting to die.

“You're like Shakespeare reborn!” she finally said after the final chuckles subsided. “I trust that an extra two pages of your *Midsummer* character analysis won't be any trouble for you, Mr. Shakespeare.”

There was a dead silence. The paper was originally supposed to be two pages which, in those days, even a *page* was a whole hell of a lot to write, let alone two. But double that?! *Four pages?! Four pages?! Four pages?!*

My classmates stared at me as if I'd committed a crime and was being sent to prison. Even Todd Smolek, master of nurples and various forms light torture, looked at me with pity.

It was Autumn in Mid-Michigan, only a few weeks into the school year, and it was already shaping up to be a long one. I'd made it this far in Owosso Middle School with a few simple truths: Everyone is a pubescent asshole, Marc Messina's parents paid for Cinemax (or *Skin-emax* as we called it), and Ms. Linacre was evil incarnate.

For my character write-up, I ended up picking Puck because he had enough lines in the play that I could quote to fill my paper with a good amount of fluff, and I likened the actions of his character to my own. I turned my paper in, and Ms. Linacre flashed that smug smile she was known for, snatching the paper from my hand, no doubt itching to use that read pen of death to bloody my grade and a month of freedom if my parents found out about the boner joke.

A week or two later, Mrs. Linacre handed out our papers. She drew out the process like the public shamer that she was, strolling around the room depositing the papers on each student's desk, the grades shouting out in big red letters on the front. So there was no doubt everyone could see.

B's here, C's there, a couple D's. *Big* red letters.

Katie Thelen, class butt-kisser, received a B minus. Her brain, unable to contemplate anything less than perfection, started short-circuiting. She made a series of

sounds and squeaks that Ms. Linacre blissfully ignored as she moved on—almost waltzing— to the next victim.

Finally, she arrived at my desk and handed me my paper. On it was a large scarlet A.

“You came through, Mr. Shakespeare,” she said.

That was the spark.

I wish it was anyone else. I’d love to say I had some kind of 90’s sit-com moment with a teacher that really got through to me, or maybe I even stumbled upon some delightfully peculiar troll under a bridge that broke out into song and dance and taught me the dangers of adverbs and the importance of *being succinct so the prose doesn’t stink!*

Anyone but her.

But we don’t get to pick.

A spark only matters when kindling catches fire and even then, it’s a delicate thing. The growing flames must be fanned, not so hard that they’re put out, but gently, until the fire begins to work on its own terms.

My kindling caught fire at Owosso High School when I met Kate Keating, my Honors Literature teacher, that gave my initial interests in writing more meaning.

Some teachers betray themselves on day one when they effectively tell you to shut the hell up, introduce themselves with counterfeit enthusiasm, and walk you through a cold syllabus, one where it reveals in detail that they’re going to fill your evenings with uninspired homework and asinine projects, maybe because they feel you

need to pay our dues, or perhaps because they're parttime sadists, all while expecting you to act like a professional, tight-assed little adult—one that can't legally smoke, drink, or vote, mind you—with a pencil in you hang and a smile on your face.

The first day of class, we heard Ms. Keating before we saw her, as we did most days, her jovial laugh echoing down the halls of the Southeast wing of Owosso High. Her face matched her laugh, if that makes sense; It always carried some kind of cheer. She introduced herself as a lover of Willy Nelson, the Chicago Cubs, and Marshmallow Fluff, the latter of which she expressed she'd like her coffin to be pumped full of at her funeral prior to being buried.

That first week, we watched the original *Star Wars* trilogy because she considered it to be “the myth of our time” and then were tasked with picking a character and analyzing how they fit into the tragedy that was Darth Vader.

As a lover of *Star Wars*, this exercise inspired me to start my very first extracurricular writings about big, pompous space operas, all of which I had epic plans for and just *knew* they'd be Hollywood blockbusters.

Soon after, we read *The Crucible* aloud in class and I voiced Judge Danforth as Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“I CRUSH you with my gavel!” I may or may not have improvised where I felt Arthur Miller was lacking.

For one of our assignments, I wrote a short story about a witch named Gertrude, who was falsely accused of being a witch purely based on gossip, but was *actually* a witch that hadn't practiced her powers in a millennia, and eventually not only deep-fried

an Abigail Williams-like character in a vat of water as she tried to escape, but saved a Tituba-like character from madness (because come on, Arthur, we deserve *closure*).

Kate Keating used modern takes on age-old curriculum requirements with twists that appealed to pimply high schoolers with attention deficits. In class, we had open conversations where we were encouraged to speak our minds. She was loving, funny and kept in touch with our problems, hopes and fears. She understood that *The Grapes of Wrath* wasn't the only thing we had going on. Considering I was as gay as the day is long and deeply closeted, covering it as best I could with sports and a monthly quota of one make out session with a female, I had a *few* things going on behind the scenes.

We played practical jokes on her and she reciprocated. I'd put Scotch tape on her apple, and she'd put Marshmallow Fluff on my seat before I sat down. Some of us would sneak into her room through the window during lunch and flip all her desks upside down, and then wait just outside, sitting on the lawn under the sill, just to hear her laugh. She wasn't much older than us, just out of college.

Had the superintendent, Master of Administration, Baron of Standardized Testing, Breaker of Spirits, walked in at any given moment during that year, he would have shit his wool britches.

One of our more notable classroom discussions was around Henry David Thoreau and "Civil Disobedience." I'll fast-forward to the good part...

"Henry David Thoreau *sucks*," I said bluntly.

"*Ha!* You're gonna have to do better than that, Smith," Ms. Keating said. "A *lot* of people have said he sucks. Why do *you* think he sucks?"

“It seems like he’s preaching being different solely for the sake of being different. Is he a hippie or something? Does he go against the grain just to piss people off?”

She laughed. “He would be an advocate for you to be able to sit where you’re sitting and tell me, the teacher, your lord for the hour, that he *sucks* and this lesson plan *sucks*.”

“I’m still not sure I get it.”

“I try to think of it like this: The day you stop questioning your leaders is the day you lose your rights.”

To this day, I still quote her, as it becomes timelier than ever.

Kate Keating was the gentle breath upon my flame that was writing, not only through her class, but the type of person she helped me become.

“There’s no money in that,” my mom said.

“We’re not paying for an English degree,” my dad said.

“You can write on the side. Like a hobby. Stick with Pre-Med.”

Michigan State University came next, as did many self-discoveries as a gay man, plus a few different changes to my major (five to be exact), English or Writing not one of them. Writing was a fledgling hobby in the background. I barely putting a pen to paper or fingers to keys by my senior year. But boy did I love to tell people, “I’m a writer!”

After graduation, I still held onto the notion someday I might be a writer. After all, those first jobs I knew I had to take on would be temporary, menial things a writer must

endure to pay the bills and torture his soul and *struggle*. How could I possibly hope to be the next master of the written word without a grueling story for the back flap of the book I hadn't started yet?

At some point in my mid-twenties, I realized I hadn't written anything other than emails for at least two or three years.

My flame was sputtering. Not enough logs in the wood box.

Another thing, when you graduate college and join the workforce, they stop feeding you books to read. Your boss, Director of Sales and Marketing, isn't going to slam *East of Eden* or *No Country for Old Men* down on your desk and say, "Read this by the end of the week!"

I was vacationing at my Uncle Ron's house in Oakland Park, Florida one winter, walking aimlessly around the house after I'd had enough of the ninety-degree "winter weather" outside. I found Ron in his office, his giant 6'4 frame hunched over his desk in a chair that looked comically small and a laptop that looked more the size of a lady's compact under his large hands and long fingers. I decided to bother him.

"I'm bored," I said, slumping down into a chair across from him.

"If you're bored, you're boring," he said in a monotone voice, his eyes never leaving his computer screen.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at an item on his shelf.

He looked up, somewhat annoyed, and followed my finger. "That's a ceremonial Native American spear."

"What's that?" I asked again.

"That's a clock I received after ten years of service at work."

“What’s *that*?”

“I know what you’re doing, jackass.” I had him chuckling now. “Okay, come here.”

He stood up and crossed the room to his shelf of books. I followed. He pulled down a funky orange and yellow one and handed it to me. It was *Intensity* by Dean Koontz.

“Is it *intense*?” I mocked.

“A bit. Read that book and let me know what you think.”

I read it in less than two days. To call it a page-turner wouldn’t do it justice, a thriller not nearly enough. Throughout the book I was sweating. I was scared. And I *loved* it. I’d never read something before that elicited a physical response from me.

If Ms. Linacre was my spark, and Ms. Keating the fan to my flame, then my Uncle Ron was a can of lighter fluid.

Next, he gave me *Duma Key* by Stephen King. The pages didn’t turn as quickly as *Intensity*, but I found myself thinking more about the writing itself. It was beautifully composed, surprisingly uplifting, and best of all, terrifying.

“I always thought he was about cheap scares,” I reported back to my Uncle Ron.

“He’s one of the greatest writers of our time.”

“The book seemed to be more about the characters than the plot. Like the plot move around *them*, instead of the other way around.”

I started making more of these inferences the more I read for *pleasure*. I think the last time I’d done such a thing was in Elementary School reading *Goosebumps*.

He exposed me to not only thriller or horror writers, but Carl Hiaasen, David Sedaris, and Cormac McCarthy. My library grew as he gifted me these books and

became more aware literary concepts like structure and characterization, subconsciously I might add, because when we're reading, we're also learning, especially the writer in us who's *always* hungry for it.

I began filling my free time with novels and short story collections, at least a book a week, and learned more about writing in a couple years than I had in twenty-five years of life.

There was a slight problem...

*If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others:
read a lot and write a lot.*

-Stephen King

I definitely had the reading part down but couldn't say the same about the *writing*.

I decided to give myself a gift at work, that being the gift of *time*.

The office had a bedbug problem of biblical proportions, and someone was also defecating on the bathroom walls in the men's bathroom.

At this point, somewhat burnt out, I decided to take some time off because, call me old-fashioned, but I'm not a big fan of bedbugs or being surrounded by shit while I, myself am trying to take a shit.

In my staycation at home, I got serious about writing for the first time in a long time and churned out a short story that was picked up by a small publisher for an anthology series.

It was exhilarating. They promised me five dollars, printed my story, ended up paying nothing, and promptly went out of business. But that's not the point. I was finally a real author! I'd discovered it's almost as if you need to actually write to get published...

Mind blown.

I do my best to tend to my own fire nowadays, though it'd be nothing but cold, damp ash if it weren't for my three firekeepers.

I don't know what happened to Ms. Linacre. She left Owosso Middle School shortly after I moved on to high school. I like to think that maybe she returned to her first job: Presiding over the lake of fire.

Kate Keating-*Lemanski*, now married, still teaches at Owosso High School. We catch up from time to time and love to remind each other how intrinsically linked our old age is. For a while, I thought maybe her youth was what helped her connect so well with us students, but I don't think so anymore. Looking at her Facebook page, she's still getting through to her kids and has developed what you might even call a fan base.

My Uncle Ron passed a couple years ago from brain cancer. He was my best friend and I miss him dearly. However, in a sense, we also stay in touch; He left me many books, all of which he's read and I have not. I like to think that each time I finish a story, I get to know him even better, and he lives on.