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Bill Males

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ONE STEP FROM CHILDHOOD

Something's wrong with childhood. I don't care how many grown-ups carry on about it, you don't see any kids doing so. Childhood's a thing you want out of when you're in it, and the sooner the better.

I tried to end my childhood by moving away from it. I was seventeen. It was an age when I was looking for signs of adulthood in myself. And what better sign than to look out my window each day and see that Western Oklahoma--where I had passed my childhood--was gone.

What I saw, instead, was the courtyard of a college in New England. And that courtyard was my vision of adulthood.

It wasn't something I participated in. It was something I observed, studied . . . tried to understand, from my window.

This was a boys' college, or men's college I guess you should say since we're talking about adulthood. And I could see young men crossing the courtyard in a steady traffic from morning to late evening.

They were wearing what might be considered sloppy clothes. But that was all right. Word had gone down that it was proper to wear sloppy clothes that year. It was the year of 64-

65, and everything was different from earlier times in the history of hummans/humankind. It was OK to wear jeans with your tweed jacket. It was even OK to say ain't and talk country.

But it wasn't OK to be country, which was my problem. I kept to my room and kept to the conservative clothes I'd brought with me from home. I thumbed through my dictionary, searching out the meanings of the odd words my classmates uttered between their ain'ts.

I was an outsider--watching the tropical fish in the bowl. I observed adulthood, as it was being presented to me, and wondered how I'd ever get to be a part of it.

That was the fall of my freshman year--and the winter. But by and by came the spring and with it a ray of hope. It was now time for the Easter Egg hunt--the seeking out of our first real grades. They were posted on teachers' doors, hidden all around the college, and it was an all-day job--at least for me--to find them.

But I looked forward to that day, nevertheless. I had a feeling in my bones that said that grades might very well be my ticket. If anything could ever make me a part of the college, as opposed to merely being present on campus, it would probably be my grades. This is what my feeling said, though not so articulately. It was a feeling, not a thought.

There I said campus, but there was no campus, actually. And if the college was disappointed in me for how I looked or spoke, then I guess I was a little disappointed in it. I had expected rolling hills and maple trees. Well, this was the

land of the Ivy League, after all. Was I so wrong in expecting ivy?

What you got was an archipelago of tiny college blocks- small campuses, if you please. They were cut apart by city streets. And buses and vans and trucks and townie cars roared by on these streets--like sharks, out to get you if you got too cocky or too wrapped up in your own thoughts.

And certainly I was getting pretty cocky as I discovered first the one good grade and then the other. It hadn't really dawned on me that my hermit life, spent in quiet desperation and involuntary celibacy, might be good for something--namely, for making grades. I had simply aspired to being average, but my grades were telling me I was superior. And this sudden shift in my fortunes made me drunk with pride.

(Pride, as we all know, is a deadly sin. And with Pride cometh the Fall. I wonder how this story will end, don't you?)

Well. I had this ruler with me, to convince me that my unbelievable grades were real. And at every teacher's door, at every new list of grades, this same dialogue was repeated--between me and my ruler:

"No," said I, "that grade couldn't be mine." "Oh, but yes," the ruler would say. "Look here!" And then it measured off the grade across from my name, proving beyond a doubt that the grade was mine.

I would read each grade, from left to right, and then from right to left. And after awhile I'd say, "Yes, it's mine."

The grades were cookies, just like the ones Alice ate in Wonderland. Each one said, "Eat me!" And every one I ate

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made me grow a little taller, until finally it was everything I could do to huddle myself together enough to make my way through the maze of medieval walks and archways and winding staircases that led to my English teacher's rooms. There I bided my time, giant that I was, waiting for the corridor to clear. I knew that my procedure with the ruler was a little queer, and I didn't want anyone to witness it.

"Pretty good grade you made," said a guy from my entryway. He was in my English seminar, too, and here to check his grade. But he didn't have to come up on me like that. I had almost cried out.

I tried to respond to him. I said "Uh" or "Yeah" or something like that. I struggled in that tight corridor, trying to hide my ruler, and my surprise, and my pride.

"You must write a lot better than you talk," he said. "Shall I squash him?" was my thought. "Shall I devastate

him with my grade in French?" But no. I kept my peace, itching to get to the list and compare his English grade with mine. I hoped he had flunked.

"I'm on my way to do my wash," he said, looking at his watch. "Can't afford to waste all time, you know. Can't spend all day just checking your grades."

He was trying to deflate me. I was working to push my ruler up under my shirt.

He glanced at his watch again, as if he had seen it the first time. "Well, Berry," he said, "it's been fun talking with you, but I've gotta run. Road trip this evening, you know. Bunch of us going up to Conn College."

That was a girls' (women's--if we were talking about

adulthood!) school. Now was he going to ask me if I'd be there.

"Been there yet?" I shook my head. My head wasn't quite as big as it had been.

"You ought to get out a little, Berry--move a little." Please, God. Send this person away. "Speaking of being on the move, I made the crew team," he continued. "Found out yesterday. Isn't that fantastic?"

I nodded. "Yes, it is," he said, as he turned to go. "It's pretty fantastic."

I imagined him telling himself how fantastic he was, all the way down the stairs. I heard his footsteps disappear, anyway. And now I was all alone with the list on our teacher's door. I could confirm, with my ruler, that I had done well in English and that he, in fact, had done rather poorly--considering what a fantastic achiever he was.

I now had all my grades and could work out my average. My average made me worth three or maybe four of your regular freshmen. And since each freshman was worth around a half dozen applicants to the college--only one in six being admitted--my arithmetic led me to believe that I was worth at least a couple of dozen regular folks back home.

I was now growing in stature again. Was I Alice in Wonderland or Frankenstein's monster? Anyway, I had to hurry to get out of the college buildings before I got stuck.

I emerged into the city street, in all my greatness--feeling almost immortal. I was a butterfly, leaving its cocoon. I was a man in my own right, breaking free of the confines of childhood. From being a nobody and a hick, I was

emerging as a somebody and a scholar.

I was in love and longed to proclaim my love to the whole world. "Whatever I look like or sound like," I longed to say, "I am, in fact, among the best in my class. . . maybe among the best in the whole country, when it comes to grades. . . possibly among the best in the whole world!"

But then I resolved not to be humble, but to play humble. I wouldn't force myself upon others, like that twerp I'd just met at the teacher's door. I would let people find out for themselves how fantastic I was. The truth would come out, sooner or later. That was my last thought, as I took what might have been my last step.

A squeal of brakes and a two-ton truck came to a dead halt right in front of me. . . or rather I was right in front of it.

"You crazy college creep!" the truck driver shouted. "Why don't you look where you're going!"

I backed up onto the curb and watched the truck start off again. The driver shook his fist at me out the window. ☹

(BILL MALES was reared in Cheyenne and graduated from high school there in 1964. He now resides in Sweden.)