The Secret Life of E. Robert Pendleton

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Extract

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Part 1
DESPAIR

One

In the Friday-afternoon lull within the English Department of Bannockburn College, E. Robert Pendleton sat listening to the sound of life outside his window. He had been trying to distract himself by grading papers. It hadn't worked. He took off his glasses and rubbed each lens in the ponderous way he had perfected years earlier to create a pause while teaching.

He looked at the clock again, something he had sworn he wouldn't do. There was a half-hour yet to wait before leaving for the airport to pick up fellow novelist Allen Horowitz, whose latest work, an autobiography, had occupied the number one spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list for most of '85. Horowitz was in to lecture as part of the Bannockburn College Distinguished Lecture Series, and, if it hadn't been that Pendleton was now being watched by the department over the fiasco surrounding Horowitz's visit, he would have taken a drink. But for now he remained sober, at least until the party he would be hosting at his house that night.

Outside his office window, Bannockburn's quad of ivy-covered buildings was again an armada of painted, billowing sheets – Homecoming Weekend, students spurring on a rivalry with Quaker-founded Carleton College, an annual game billed as Non-Believers vs. True-Believers. Traditionally, Bannockburn students held up past scores during the game, while Quakers held up numbered Scripture references.

But in this, the twenty-second Homecoming Weekend of his tenure track at Bannockburn, things were different, and, even he,

tired and troubled as he was, would miss this spectacle, this myth of Bannockburn College, self-described 'venerable cradle of learning'. In reality, the college was a 'venerable cradle of mediocrity', accredited academic redemption sold at exorbitant prices to talentless drones of despairing, wealthy parents.

That the myth of Bannockburn could still be foisted on people amazed Pendleton, but it could. To an extent, he had been lured by this myth, a brochure with images of honey-lit fall, the season of change, from one shot of a student sitting akimbo against a tree reading a book, to another of a long-haired co-ed caught in stride, her books cradled to her breasts, to intimate classroom seminar settings, students encircling a professor theatrically reading aloud from a book held at arm's length. Who wouldn't have wanted that?

Pendleton took a deep breath and felt he was watching everything for the last time. He was facing a review by the Faculty Board regarding his tenure.

The frenetic atmosphere below had reached its climax with the mass arrival of parents after lunch, the new cars gleaming against the low-slung sun, pyres of burnt leaves scenting the air in an almost pagan ritual, meat sizzling in oil-drum barbecues as fraternities hosted welcoming parties.

Voices carried across the quad as he rose and stood at the window. An intramural flag football game was being contested under the watchful eye of the founding father of the college, an industrialist Russian émigré, Iosif Zhvanetsky, who had turned philanthropist as industrialists like Carnegie did in the early twentieth century. To Pendleton's way of thinking, there were so many demigods in this country, so many men who had clawed their way to the top, then had given it all away, men who wanted monuments built to themselves. That was the essential irony of these Bannockburns, colleges founded by intuitive, illiterate geniuses, men who had come from nothing and gained everything without ever having opened a book.

A liberal arts education was something Pendleton had never fully reconciled as truly benefiting anybody.

Indeed, Bannockburn College's history was founded on such an arc of rapaciousness and contrition. Pendleton knew the fifty-cent

version by heart. Bannockburn was built on the ruins of a clothing factory along what had once been a half-mile meandering bend on the St Joe River. The bend had officially become an island when the illiterate Russian émigré factory founder had the slim margin of connective land dug away to create a feudal moat. Before an infamous fire in 1911 destroyed the factory and took the lives of eighteen women locked inside, the Russian had amassed a fortune. Although cleared of charges of criminal negligence, the unmarried Russian died a few years later, bequeathing his fortune to the establishment of a women's college on the ruins of the factory site. The name, Bannockburn, it turned out, had been chosen by the Russian for an unrequited love he had held for a married woman, Lucy Bannockburn, who had rejected his advances and died in the fire.

The facts had surfaced as a historian collated and gathered the Russian's letters for a permanent library exhibit. The rumor of ghosts haunting the campus led to a dramatic decrease in enrollment, though it was more probably the reality of the Great Depression. The college was similarly fated when the school's library began to tilt and sink into the ground. Seemingly, architects had forgotten to take into account the weight of the books when designing the foundation. Some insisted it had been done maliciously, in response to the growing suffrage movement.

The abandoned college served as a dormitory for the National Guard through the Second World War and on through the beginning of the Cold War, before reestablishing itself in 1952 as a liberal arts college catering to ex-military granted educational stipends under the GI Bill, finally morphing again in the Vietnam era as a refuge for rich white males seeking to avoid being drafted. The raising of a makeshift drawbridge during the height of the Vietnam draft struggle, cutting off the landmass of Bannockburn from the outside world, remains a quintessential image of Bannockburn's liberalism.

Pendleton knew that history by rote now. He felt a strange melancholy in the pit of his stomach that so many years had passed, that the rave reviews for *Winterland* had been eventually traded for this place. That is how he liked to remember leaving New York, trading it for the seductive lure of tempered academia with its sabbaticals.

The truth of his arrival at Bannockburn was far starker, although even now he was loath to admit the reality. He lost his publisher at the time, his back against the wall, career-wise. His latest work had been rejected by every major house in New York. Three years for naught on a work he had poured his heart into. He had lied to his interviewers and, like so many other struggling job candidates, euphemistically called it a 'work-in-progress', though his crisis was different. The book was done. It was a good book, in fact, a breakthrough book, but nobody would let him break through.

The waiting had become a sickness. And then, suddenly, Bannockburn had granted him an interview. Oh, Bannockburn, out there on the plains, a last bastion of respectability, an institution blithely unaware of his despair or failure as he interviewed in a downtown Chicago hotel during the annual AWP hiring convention. Hadn't they seen through him? But they hadn't! He ended up getting the job on his past record, on a slew of past reviews, a job gained against no less than sixty other desperate applicants, a job offer he wept at getting when the letter arrived confirming his appointment.

These were the facts.

That Pendleton could look back on his history like this served only to make him feel old, useless and confused. Too much history had passed. It was hard being honest with himself any more, to understand the real circumstances of his life. These silent interrogations had gone on too long.

The truth was, all was not as it seemed here, the subterfuge so great, the camouflage of desperation so complete, failure bestowed with a title, with a bronzed nameplate on a polished oak door. It was that nightmare where you tried to run, but your legs wouldn't carry you, tried to scream, but nothing came out. That was the sort of silence he understood belied the long corridors of academic ease.

How often had he wanted to confide in someone, to speak the truth, to arrive at least at a semblance of honesty with those around him, or, in his more heightened moments of anxiety, to shout out to passing parents, to warn them off as they came through the college on Open House for Prospective Students.

But of course he hadn't shouted, instead posing as one of those glad fellows of learning in the nook of the Creative Writing offices, reading manuscripts, grading papers, one of those professors hemmed in by bookshelves of leather-bound editions of the Ancients and Enlightenment figures with sophisticated names like Rousseau, Descartes and Voltaire, among tomes of literary criticism and slim volumes of their own published poetry that one could be forgiven for assuming held essential truths, the distilled learning of a lifetime.

Such was the common misconception of these works. Poetry was the de facto genre for those who still wrote here, one-time novelists who had philosophically abandoned the novel's bourgeois demand for narrative structure, for the whittled creative five-minute exercises of despair, chrysalises of dysfunction, impenetrable, hopelessly self-referential or concerned with ancient civilizations. Such works were published through a sub-world of lesser presses established as so-called legitimate outlets for tenure-track faculty desperately needing publication. It went without saying, though Pendleton had said it on more than one occasion, most notably during an uproarious outburst at a faculty party after a week of rejection letters from such presses, that the editors at these sub-world presses were ultimately colleagues, each publishing in what amounted to an inner sanctum of mutual gratification, where the goal of such work had become not so much to be read as interpreted, creating a sub-species of literary bottom feeder, generating a perpetual and self-sustaining machinery of critical analysis.

Achieving mental illness was the highest accolade in this so-called literature.

Pendleton looked up and listened to the faint din of students' shouts muffled by the inlay of stylized Victorian lead-paned stained glass.

A kid with a backpack had his arm slung on the shoulder of a girl in a hunter's orange jacket and tight jeans. She was casually kissing the kid's hand. How did one become disconnected from that youth, from that ease, from the languid sexuality of hanging out in dorm rooms, of eating and sleeping with someone, of staying up all night studying in the company of someone you loved?

These were the questions spiraling in his head. Was there a definitive day when things changed, when you found yourself on the other side of life? Pendleton took a shallow breath, feeling lightheaded, the stream of questions running their course like this, staring out of the latticed window of his office, the crisscross of shadows like a mask, watching life below him, feeling the loss. Wasn't this the muse of poets, lost love, lost time?

So why hadn't he written anything in a decade?

The greenhouse effect of the window made Pendleton hot. He knew he shouldn't have worn the twill wool jacket to work, but today he was confronting his longtime nemesis and fellow Columbia graduate, Allen Horowitz. He needed to hide behind the façade of a professor given to the profession of teaching. If the cocoon of isolation was complete at Bannockburn, or, at least, if self-delusion could be maintained for months at a time, it was broken in these encounters, in this infiltration by outside life. Unlike the work of others within his department who could publish in small academic journals, novel writing was in the public domain. There was an expectation of notoriety.

You were either famous or not famous.

Allen Horowitz was Pendleton's particular nightmare, a guy perennially atop the *New York Times* bestseller list for fiction, author of eight novels, a guy whom he had initially toed the line with, way back in grad school, when both had works-in-progress appear in *Atlantic Monthly's Best American Voices*. They had shared the same editor and publisher at first, two rising stars, at least during the initial years, then the divergence, the meteoric rise of Horowitz as Pendleton slipped into oblivion.

Horowitz's most recent work was an autobiography, titled, *I'm Sick of Following My Dreams: I'm Just Going to Ask Them Where They're Going & Hook up with Them Later*, a work that had purportedly captured the glibness of the modern age in what a *New York Times* reviewer called 'a free-spirited journey of soaring individuality and genius, irreverent, iconoclastic, funny and peculiarly American', the back cover given completely to a shot of a beachcomber Horowitz in an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, a string of blanched coral beads around his neck, his hair tousled,

his face wind-burnt like a castaway. The pièce-de-résistance was a tropical drink with a paper umbrella Horowitz held toward the camera.

The book was as much about the picture as anything else, or so Pendleton concluded, because he had not brought himself to read the book.

These days he just read reviews. In fact, he assiduously kept a tally of them with a spreadsheet of who had reviewed whom, charting the incestuous nature of literary reviewing, convinced that the rise and fall of writers had all to do with this tight interconnectedness. Needless to say, the glowing *New York Times* review of Horowitz's autobiography could be charted back to Horowitz's ex-wife's glowing review of Sarah Meltzer's novel, the same Sarah Meltzer who just happened to be the reviewer of Horowitz's autobiography. Represented graphically with vectors of interconnectedness between writers, the patterns were more easily discernible.

Pendleton had such a chart.

That this preoccupation with reviews had sidelined his own work, that it had become a psychosis, was something he knew in his heart, but not his head. Having not published any major fiction in ten years, he felt at times like a priest turned atheist who continues to preach from the pulpit because there is no place else to go. He stood up before students day in and day out, discussing the writing process, dabbling in the formula of genres, deciphering how genre worked, deconstructing structure and character, plot elements, tearing apart the seams of fiction until sentences unraveled into words and words into squiggly lines. There were times when he would repeat a word over and over again until the word became disconnected from what it represented, when it became merely a sound, rendering the word meaningless, something he practiced, obliterating the world of representation, the world of his so-called craft.

Horowitz's impending arrival had become a flashpoint in Pendleton's life, an episode where the latent extent of his own personal crisis had manifested itself within the English Department. He had been on leave for mental problems in the past and

had been able to take a leave-of-absence without prejudice. He was safe with tenure.

But what he did to Horowitz was something different entirely. It changed the stability that had for so long held him shackled.

The college's Humanities School had agreed to fork out over three-quarters of its yearly budget from the Distinguished Lecture Series for Horowitz's appearance, and Pendleton had been asked to arrange the details with Horowitz, given they were one-time classmates, not that he ever got to speak with Horowitz. Everything went though Horowitz's agent.

Horowitz was getting nearly half the yearly salary of tenured faculty for his appearance, a fact which made Pendleton physically sick, given Horowitz was already pulling down seven figures for his novels. He kept thinking that, at one point, they had been equals. That was an indisputable fact! Even Horowitz would have had to admit that. In fact, it wasn't all in his head, this rivalry. Hadn't Horowitz found out through the Columbia alumni magazine that Pendleton had suffered a medical setback and sent him a sardonic, get-well cartoon card of a raven sitting on a windowsill looking at Edgar Allen Poe. The cartoon bubble over Poe read, 'Hello, Birdy,' the caption beneath, 'What if there had been Prozac in the nineteenth century?' It was signed, 'As always, Allen!'

If Pendleton had been fixated on Horowitz, so, too, Horowitz had been watching him, or so he rationalized to himself.

It galled Pendleton that Bannockburn thought so highly of Horowitz as to front him that sort of money. In the years he had suffered to read on campus, Pendleton had read exclusively to students, either those taking his class or those wanting to endear themselves to him before taking his class. No faculty had ever showed to his readings.

It was the fixation which eventually led him to take his revenge on the school as much as on Horowitz, to choose Homecoming Weekend, the worst weekend in the academic year to schedule an academic event. Left in his hands, and with mere student volunteers, nobody had voiced concern regarding the date of Horowitz's appearance, well, not until the date was set and posters had been printed. It was only then that Pendleton was confronted, but it was too late to reschedule the event.

Despite his feigned air of distress when confronted by the Chair of the English Department regarding the date, it was obvious the event had been a setup. That's the word the Chair used, 'setup', like Pendleton had put out a professional hit on Horowitz.

It was an outburst even Pendleton hadn't figured on, the Chair outlining the scenario, shouting it at the top of his voice. There would be no way the library auditorium could be filled on Homecoming Weekend. No amount of extra-credit seeding or quasi-threats by teachers would get students to attend the event. What Horowitz was going to find on arrival was a campus gone riot, painted-faced drunks roaming the campus, a send-up of college life. And, though that might have had its charm, in keeping with Horowitz's devil-may-care autobiography, not so Horowitz's eventual humiliation, reading to a press-gang faculty of English professors with a supporting cast of spouses in an annex of the library not big enough to swing a cat. Horowitz was a man who would get his own back in print, or, as the Chair shouted, 'This goes beyond some personal vendetta, beyond your own sickness. Do you know what Allen Horowitz could do to the reputation of Bannockburn College?'

It had pained him to suffer this outburst from a guy fifteen years his junior, but particularly from a guy with whom he had held philosophical disputes before. Charles Camden, PhD was an anglophile, New Historicist, Edwardian scholar with a phony British accent who specialized in the sexual dynamics of male cross-dressing in English theatre. The guy was literally a cock sucker, a homosexual who had only recently come out of the closet, a guy who had been seen in drag in Chicago on more than one occasion, but such was the lamentable way of life at the Bannockburns of the world. Guys like Camden had been, for a decade, at the vanguard of the Humanities, having abandoned the study of the novel and poetic form for the so-called legitimate contention that all societal text was of equal importance. Camden didn't trust intentionality. Ergo, he didn't trust writers or art. Even before this heated exchange, the fault line between Pendleton and Camden had shifted.

In the end, Camden redefined Horowitz's appearance not as a public reading, but rather as a symposium for faculty. Pendleton

was to contact Horowitz's agent concerning the change in focus, while Camden sent a memo out requiring faculty to remain in town over what had unofficially always been a long weekend, where tradition had long been to cancel Friday classes. A dinner party was to be hosted by Pendleton at his house to welcome Horowitz.

Pendleton had faxed a letter to Horowitz's agent outlining the change of focus, underlining the word 'symposium'. He thought the word would have appealed to Horowitz's ego.

A pall had settled over him. He was avoided by colleagues in the lead-up to Homecoming. His two prior breakdowns, or 'sabbaticals' as the department administration had previously and prudently defined them, were brought to bear again, in light of what he had done. He was asked to advise the medical office on campus of the prescription medicines he was taking. A formal letter arrived in his departmental in-box, voicing concern regarding his mental health. On another day, he was asked to list his recent publications and appearances.

On yet another day, the in-box was stuffed with printouts of enrollment figures for his Intro and Advanced Fiction Writing classes, the enrollment cap circled along with actual enrollment. His Advanced Fiction class was just above half full, and, though his Intro to Creative Writing was necessarily full, since it was a core requirement, student evaluations rated him as unmotivated and ill-prepared. As one student put it, 'Pendleton sucks!'

More forms arrived, with student evaluation scores over the years, charting a steady decline in performance that frightened him. What had he become?

In the end, he just retrieved the material from the in-box and emptied it all into the garbage, without even looking at it. If he was going to challenge any board review regarding his tenure, the best policy was to act erratic, not to cooperate and to fall back on a claim of manic depression. If he were lucky, a sabbatical might be suggested, though he knew this endgame of personal destruction was coming to a close.

Time had slipped by. Pendleton looked up at the clock and left his office. He crossed the quad, against the throng of students, going

toward the dining hall, where he was meeting up with Henry James Wright, an ex-military, laid-off ex-county newspaper reporter who now worked quasi-full-time for the college, taking pictures of student life as part of *The Heritage Project – Bannockburn Through the Ages*. Wright was the last person in the world Pendleton wanted to accompany him out to meet Horowitz, but the Chair had insisted Wright go along to capture Horowitz's arrival at the airport.

Pendleton saw Wright moving behind the spider of his tripod, catching the Brothers Grimm allegory of the Homecoming festival, the yearly spectacle of Little Red Riding Hood-bodiced women with sausage legs, setting up tables with an autumnal harvest of misshapen gourds, squash and rutabaga around the glazed heads of slow-smoked pigs.

Wright barely acknowledged Pendleton when he saw him, merely gathered his equipment, and both men walked toward the parking lot without uttering a word, though, thank God there was a final member in the Horowitz greeting party – Adi Wiltshire.

Adi was waiting by Pendleton's car, prudishly dressed in a librarian skirt and matching hound's-tooth jacket with a ruffled white shirt buttoned to her neck, as was her MO.

Hand-picked by the Chair, Adi was, at a second glance, an amorous, big-breasted, longtime grad student, a true lover of literature who was known to have tit-fucked no less than two Pulitzer Prize recipients.

Just seeing her standing there, Pendleton felt more at ease that this weekend could be navigated. Adi Wiltshire inspired recklessness in men of his age. He was thankful that Horowitz might thus be occupied over the weekend with Wiltshire, that events might pass without incident, and that he might as yet keep his job.

For where was a man like E. Robert Pendleton to go if he ever left Bannockburn College? What would become of him on the outside?

Yes, he was thankful that someone as unlikely as Adi Wiltshire might be his savior. But, just to be on the safe side, as he pulled into the regional airport, he turned and said quietly to Adi, 'Don't spread this around, but rumor has it Horowitz is being considered for the Pulitzer.'