

School Days:

It never fails that during this time of year I get the same melancholy ache that I've gotten since I was six years old. It's not so much a pain and it's not really sadness. I guess melancholy is the right word. It starts sometime in August and continues unabated until the first snow. Some days it's very present, always there and just out of reach. Some days I hardly notice it. That is, until I see a tiny kid with a huge backpack full of books.

When I was six and lived for baseball, the beginning of the school year was the end of life. The end of living outside, all day long, the end of hours of solitary infield practice, the end of choose up games with my neighborhood team mates. It was the end of meaningful pursuits, simple pleasures and slow mornings. School was the beginning of someone else's rules, tight shoes, neckties and homework. I began, the day after Labor Day, to look forward to that day in June, the greatest day in the history of any calendar anywhere, when we would clean out our desks for the summer. On the first day of school I began a countdown towards the last day. Everyday in between was an exercise in patience and courage.

I'll use one day in early spring as an example. Each St. Patrick's Day I would dress entirely in Kelly Green. My mother would die a shirt and trousers and socks. The green necktie was purchased. I would march off to school past the grinning faces of grownups and the wonderstruck stare of toddlers. I must have looked like something between a Leprechaun and a Martian. Then the school day commenced. I would be sent by my teacher to each class in each grade, sometimes with the excuse of carrying a note and sometimes just because I was so darn cute. I went to a large Catholic grade school in New York City. There were two classes of twenty-five students in each of the grades 1 through 8.

When you're red headed, tiny, and green from head to toe, and you make a morning-long, continuous appearance in front of four hundred schoolmates, you learn two things. You learn to be funny and you learn to hate school. Oh, it's not that I dislike showing off, I don't. I have a hard time with being *told* to show off.

When I was seventeen and lived for love and poetry, the beginning of the school year was the end of freedom. I had fallen madly in love with a girl from Chicago and she with me. Why is it that the more romantic you are, the farther away your soul mate seems to reside?

There's something inherently broken hearted in the Romantic Ideal. But romantic I was, and romantic I behaved. Quick, what's the opposite of romance? If you said school, you'd be right.

How could I possibly pay attention to the school stuff when the life stuff was so much more interesting? When I wasn't cutting classes I was on a picket line somewhere. When I wasn't cutting or marching I was writing and daydreaming. If you're getting the idea that structure and long-term goals are not my cup of tea, you're getting the right idea. Working for four years to get a degree so that I could go to work in a job that would last the rest of my life seemed like self-inflicted pain to achieve ongoing aches. Aches and pains. That's a life?

Any day feeding squirrels or counting trees or chasing clouds has been, and will always be, infinitely preferable to the clock driven, socially restrictive, directed-by-others days of school and career.

I consider myself hugely fortunate that, for all the years I spent in the workaday world, my days were spent making people happy. Mostly little people. My work was inventing toys and games. My job was putting smiles in boxes and under Christmas trees. My colleagues and I would spend a great portion of every working day overcome with out-loud, bellyache laughter. We had fun. We made fun. I was privileged to work alongside some of the most interesting, intelligent, creative, downright funny men and women who ever walked the planet. Being with them is the *only* thing I miss about business. I was lucky to have replaced the standard grown-up's life with a life of make believe and laughter.

Now, I am fifty-seven and I live for the woods, the words and the Angels. But the feeling is still with me. The beginning of the school year elicits images of my six-year-old granddaughter marching off to first grade with a heavy backpack, too early in the morning, facing the end of fun and the beginning of growing up. She is tiny. She is funny. She is very, very smart. I hope she finishes first grade taller, funnier and smarter. I have my doubts.

Maybe it's me. Maybe it's just September talking, as it does every year. Maybe I prefer the melancholy to the cheerful when it comes to a child's tale. Maybe I don't even know why I get sad when I see kids going off to school. Maybe it's just that I wish I were that green-dressed kid again so I could have another shot at making something happier out of my own school days.