DREAM COME TRUE

Even back in childhood and all during his young school career, Silas Wendell was fascinated with books and the printed word.

While other boys his age were mostly rough-housing and playing sports, Silas was reading everything he could get his hands on. In addition, he gingerly observed the world around him, amazed at its wonders and broad variety. He relished listening to his parents (who were both educators) read and reread his favorite bedtime stories in their modest yet cozy Charlottesville, Virginia home. He marveled at the oral retelling of classic tales by his academy teachers -- the thrilling adventures of brave Odysseus, Beowulf, Achilles, King Arthur, Sinbad the Sailor, and others.

Getting his first library card was like getting a key to a second home. Each week, he checked out the limit of a dozen exciting books, in a pleasing variety of fiction and non-fiction offerings. The matronly librarians soon treated the eager lad like a blood relative and true kindred spirit. Over time, the boy acquired a taste for his favorite authors, like Ray Bradbury, Jules Verne, and Jack London . Silas noted their unique, individual writing styles, which showcased their vivid imaginations and talents as they wrestled with crafting intricate plots, unique characters, and colorful settings.

Before long -- as you might deduce -- such extensive reading leads to exploratory attempts at creative writing simply for oneself. So, with a thick notepad and a pencil, Silas Wendell knowingly set out upon his singular life's journey. He would become an author. He could clearly imagine seeing his own written creations one day lining library shelves, and being dramatically displayed in bookstore windows.

Wendell began with the usual writer's topics -- detailed descriptions of the natural world and the life of the people around him. Next, he transitioned to memories of his young years thus far. In school, his teachers were impressed with his seemingly gifted writing ability. All through the rest of elementary school and well into high school, Silas' talent was recognized, encouraged, and honed. As somewhat of a hobby, the young man next began writing letters to several of his favorite authors, and he was overjoyed when most of them wrote back with brief signed notes or even autographed photos! Later, upon graduation, the budding writer was granted a full scholarship as an English major at Brown University in Rhode Island, and soon moved from Virginia further up the East Coast.

Wendell was blessed with devoted professors who taught him how to analyze literature treasures from across the centuries and around the world, while challenging creative writing seminars offered him valuable feedback on the craft of writing. Silas made a pilgrimage of sorts to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. for a full week one summer -- a blissful plunge into the world's largest library.

The young man also got part-time jobs, first as a clerk at the venerable Providence Athenaeum Library (founded in 1836) near the university, then later as a summer assistant manager at the large Symposium Books bookstore in downtown Providence. There, he was in awe as he saw his first literary giants in person, such as Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, Ken Follett, Simon Winchester, and Paul Theroux. Silas waited in line with hundreds of other book-lovers for autographed copies of the visitor's latest best-seller, and was even able to exchange a few words or actually shake hands with his heroes! At other times, Wendell made weekend trips to New York City with like-minded writing students, to hear authors give book readings and/or lectures on writing. Once -- with the help of one of his influential English professors -- Silas was even given a 'behind-the scenes' tour of Random House Publishers in New York, where one of his favorite authors, the late James A. Michener, had been a valued client. Wendell learned about editing, proof-reading, advertising, artistic book design, the importance of critic reviews, and other aspects of the crucial 'business side' of publishing. Of course, while all of this was going on, Silas wrote and wrote and wrote: short stories, poetry, research articles, flash fiction, and just about anything that sparked his creative or required-for-class juices. The Writing Muse was surely with him! He was networking too -- trying hard to connect with other writers, used and rare book dealers, librarians, journalists, commercial bookstores, and of course the big publishing houses.

But after he graduated with honors from Brown, and returned from a five-week Grand Tour of Europe (which included visiting its most famous museums and national libraries, as well as some past legendary author homes and graves), the stark reality of getting one's writing officially published was crudely thrust into Silas' face.

The tragic fact was that no one was interested enough to buy what Wendell had so passionately written about. He felt like an actor without a role, a lone musician without an audience, a solitary teacher in an empty classroom.

At this point in his life, Silas was focusing on writing short stories in all genres. He had penned over one-hundred and fifty of them thus far, along with several dozen attempts at poetry. Wendell felt that short stories were perfect for today's 'distracted' reader, with his/her limited attention span and other temptations such as social media. A short story could be thoroughly enjoyed in twenty to forty minutes, depending on its length. Reading a complex novel took time and a serious commitment to focus upon the work over several days. Sadly, such devotion to both current and classic literature was on the decline nationwide in the United States. Television and the internet were the chief culprits to be blamed for this sorry state-of-affairs.

When Silas offered his precious writings to friends, relatives, and neighbors -- anxious for any simple encouragement or helpful feedback -- he was confronted with mostly excuses: "Sorry, but I have been very busy and didn't get around to it yet."; or "It was nice." (but with no elaboration); or "I'll let you know later after I've read it." (but the topic is never brought up again by them). Was it apathy? Jealousy? Or what?

Sometimes, a week or two or even three would go by without any word, until a frustrated Wendell had to practically beg the person again to please read his latest story. As if it was such a loathsome chore, such an ordeal of time and effort! At least his parents offered some support and comments on his work. But the disappointments as a novice author, however, were just beginning for a bewildered Silas.

Desperate to see his stories in print, Wendell made the decision to self-publish some of his stories in a few collected volumes. He chose Lulu.com and Kindle Direct Publishing on Amazon.com -- the first company for hardcover editions, and the second for paperback and eBook versions. Using each company's online templates, he slowly mastered the skills of converting his Microsoft Word documents into pdf files on Adobe Acrobat Reader, which rendered them ready for book printing. He chose his own cover art and wrote up his author bio. He selected attractive type faces and font sizes. Soon, his first book was ready for approval and manufacture. When an initial proof copy arrived in the mail, it was a moment of sublime achievement! Silas immediately ordered two dozen copies, and sent them to select family members and friends. He even donated a copy to his local public library in Providence. Meanwhile, Wendell had been hired full-time back as an assistant manager at the Symposium bookstore. He realized that he needed a regular-paying job while he continued to write. When he returned to his apartment each evening and on the weekends, Silas wrote, rewrote, and polished his works.

Wendell soon learned that the average self-published book sells about 250 copies over its lifetime. He realized that people will not buy your work: (1) if they don't know you personally and don't want to take a chance on spending money on an unknown author, or (2) if your books are not advertised, because the public has no idea that your book even exists. Marketing, therefore, would become the next challenge for the novice writer.

He paid for monthly advertising on Amazon a few different times, but although his book sales somewhat increased, he found that his advertising fees basically broke even with his book royalties. By now, Silas had a dozen different books of short stories, true-life stories, and poetry created for sale in various formats. Positive reviews slowly began appearing on Amazon. But his return was not really progressing as he had once imagined.

So next, he joined several writing groups on Facebook. He put up links to his books on Instagram and on LinkedIn. He signed up to be a free member on Word Press, Good Reads, Watt Pad, Reedsy, and other sites specializing in authorship, where other struggling writers could give honest and caring feedback to each other's works. This was extremely helpful to Wendell. Nobody knows what a writer goes through as well as another writer! he learned. Silas also constructed a website on Weebly.com for free to feature all of his short stories and poetry for anyone to read anytime and anywhere without cost. The public was a least seeing his works, based on the number of daily website visits or 'hits' that he kept careful track of. But Wendell felt that it still wasn't enough for all of his hard work and dedication.

He was, however, getting occasional modest sales during this time on his Amazon and Lulu marketplace sites. The novice author was especially heartened when he had six sales in the United Kingdom via Kindle Direct Publishing, because Amazon sold its self-published books in eight of its different world markets. Wendell was heartened to now be an official international author, albeit on an extremely tiny level! And Silas was getting small royalty checks each month from each publishing company.

Still, he wondered: should he try to write novels or screenplays instead of short stories and poetry? He obviously loved the act of writing creatively, especially doing serious historical fiction, which required thorough research for accuracy, even in short story form. But marketing was a whole new (and mostly unpleasant) challenge. Should he write instead while focusing on the narrow range of what the public was currently buying: gruesome murder mysteries, serial killers, dystopian future worlds, zombies, teen vampires, and lurid sex tales? But these were all quite boring to his tastes, so Silas decided no. Should he then try and hire a professional literary agent? Or should he pay big bucks to hire an official editor and book designer, or pay more to advertise on a larger scale? Should he try to get an established publishing house to read -- and hopefully -- accept his writings? Silas Wendell pondered and worried about all of these options at this crucial impasse in his stalled writer's life.

Next, he entered multiple writing contests -- some even requiring an entry fee -- but never won. He started to write to every publishing house he could find, sending in unsolicited manuscripts of his precious works. But month after month, he received nothing back but rejection slips -- mostly impersonal form letters that basically said: Not interested. No thanks. Not at this time.

Silas Wendell had unwittingly entered the ranks of 90+% of all new authors -- the lonely land where nobody cares, nobody wants you, and nobody reads your labors of love. At this stage, some writers keep at it. But most simply give up after sinking into a personal depression, and, defeated, try something else for a career -- both to save their own sanity and to dig their way out of poverty.

But if you live long enough, you realize that anyone's luck can change in an instant. And luck is what everyone needs to succeed, along with hard work and all-important contact networking with others.

Such a change of fortune for Silas Wendell began with a phone call one morning at work.

"Hello, Silas? This is Roscoe Tuttle. I'm a literary agent. I read some of your work that a friend of mine over at Premier Press shared with me. I think you're pretty damn good. I think I can help you break through to the broad exposure and sales territory that I'm sure you've been hoping for the last three years since you finished at Brown. How about we meet for lunch, my treat? I'm calling from my office in Boston, but I can drive down to Providence tomorrow and meet you around noon. You interested?"

"Sure, Mr. Tuttle. I would be very interested. Can we meet during my lunch hour around 12:30...is that O.K.? I work down the street from a nice Peruvian restaurant called Los Andes. How about there?"

"Sure. I know the place, Silas. Great seafood... So, I'll see you there tomorrow then. And please call me Roz. All my friends do. Thanks. Bye."

It was a perfect sunny August afternoon. Both men had the tossed Chef's Salad with spicy fresh scallops and iced tea. They got acquainted between bites. Then Roz -- tall, confident, in his late 40s with salt & pepper hair, married with children -- got down to business. His blue eyes were alert yet comforting.

"I currently work a stable of sixteen would-be authors, my friend. Four out of five new writers nationwide can't cut it and quit. My #1 job, Silas, is to make sure that my clients don't give up. Now, if I take you on and we formally sign a contract, I get 15% of everything you earn from your writing. That's a typical standard literary agent's commission. If you make nothing, I make nothing, so you never have to pay me a dime. That's how the game works. All you have to do is enjoy what you love -- writing the very, and I mean VERY, best you can -- and leave the rest to me. I'll see to the publishers, the marketing, the extra publicity, and all the rest using my many contacts in the book business which I've carefully cultivated over the last twenty plus years."

"You've read some of which I've written, Roz. Do you really think I have what it takes to 'break through' into the industry professionally?"

"In a word, yes. I can sense a winner. I'm a pretty good gambler at the horse track and in Atlantic City. I trust my instincts. Your style is crisp and masculine like Hemingway yet still unique, Silas. You're great with historical fiction, mystery, adventure, suspense, and sci-fi. You're fairly strong with westerns but frankly you're mediocre with romance. We'll work on those last two genres so don't worry. Plus, I like your theory about the short story -- you know, it being the future for new readers with limited attention spans and free time. Sherwood Anderson, O. Henry, Twain, Cheever, Updike, Poe, Asimov, Bradbury, Faulkner and others were all masters of the short story. Many writers begin with that form then transitioned into novellas, and ultimately novels. Michener, Oates, Hemingway, Stephen King and others each followed that route."

Wendell was impressed with Tuttle's literary scope. More importantly, both of their personalities seemed to mesh easily. Roz picked up the lunch check and left the tip, and Silas took the literary agent's official contract and said he would think it over for 24-hours and return it either signed or unsigned in the mail. Roz smiled as they shook hands. "That bit of caution shows you're not a fool, Silas, and proves that I was right about you. As Bogart says at the end of the movie "Casablanca": '...I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship...' I look forward to hearing back from you soon. See ya." Tuttle slipped into his shiny charcoal BMW and sped off back to Boston.

When Silas returned to work at the Symposium, he told his boss, Tim Deacon, the important news that had transpired over lunch. Tim asked to see the formal literary agent's contract and carefully studied it for a few minutes. Deacon then removed his bifocals and briefly rubbed his eyes. He returned his glasses, then thoughtfully stroked his neatly-trimmed white beard before he spoke.

"It's legit, Silas. If you want my advice, I'd say: Go for it." So Wendell signed it there and then, using Tim's black Waterford pen. After work, he posted the document back to Roscoe Tuttle's Boston office.

Over the next two weeks, Roz set up a 'local author' evening debut for Silas with the help of Tim Deacon at the Symposium bookstore. Tuttle told Wendell to invite all of his writer friends and any former professors to the event, so as to fill up the twenty-five seats that would be made available on the big night. Complimentary local newspaper and radio advertising was utilized, and attractive publicity flyers were displayed in nearby downtown store windows. Silas would do a reading from one of his favorite stories, then hold a raffle for three free books, and of course feature a book sale and personalized signing at the end.

The young author was naturally nervous, but he soon relaxed and began to enjoy his first public experience as a writer. Twenty-one of the seats were eventually filled, some with welcomed and familiar faces, others with curious book fanciers. Tim Deacon and Roscoe Tuttle stood discreetly in the back, offering smiles and encouragement. When the event's ninety minutes were over, a relieved Silas had sold and autographed seventeen of his books -- a good, pleasing start.

The next morning, Wendell saw a prominent picture of himself signing his books in the Providence Journal newspaper (locally referred to as the 'ProJo'), along with a short write-up. Proof that Roz was cleverly doing his behind-the-scenes job! [Note: The ProJo was first published in 1829, and is the oldest continuously- published daily newspaper in the United States.] This added surprise thrilled Silas, and he mailed a copy of the nicely complimentary article to his parents.

Over the next two years, Silas wrote new short stories at a feverish pace -- now totaling close to three hundred -- and had them placed into category-collections awaiting book publication. In serious consultation with Roz Tuttle, it was decided that the time was now right to transition away from self-publishing and go full-effort into professional publishing.

Premier Press was first to sign Wendell as a client, followed by Ace Publications and Wayfarer Books. Each published two of his collections, with an initial run of 8000-10,000 copies. Sales started well and remained steady, as the young author started to receive noticeable royalties. Then Roz scored big for his client with Pinnacle Publishing, who offered Silas a three-book deal with a $75,000 advance per book! Initial runs would be guaranteed at 100,000 copies per. At this point, Wendell made the serious decision to give up his job at Symposium with Tim Deacon and devote his full time to writing.

Around this same time, Silas met a lovely new woman, Lorraine Fields, who eventually moved in with him after they dated several times and hit it off. Lorraine worked as a nurse-practitioner at Roger Williams Medical Center. She would surely aid him with adding the specifics of real passion to his romance short stories! He introduced Lorraine to his parents back in Charlottesville, and he met her family in Fall River, Massachusetts. Everyone was pleased and happy with their deepening relationship.

Meanwhile, on a fairly regular basis, Roscoe Tuttle took his client around to visit various editors, publishers, book marketers, and cover art designers. He took Silas (and Lorraine too, when her schedule made it possible) to lunches, brunches, and weekend parties. Roz also helped him make appearances at city and country book fairs -- forever making new contacts and meeting other industry reps. Networking, networking, networking! Agent and client visited libraries together and offered complimentary copies of Wendell's works. More evening 'signing events' at independent and chain bookstores throughout the Northeast were also arranged. All this was done while keeping a close eye simultaneously on online sales and brainstorming new advertising strategies to boost them. And all this while Silas kept writing, writing, and writing...

At the fifth-year mark since teaming with Roz, works by Silas Wendell began appearing in the massive book-selling company Baker & Taylor -- which libraries across America easily ordered directly from its database for their collections. In another major coup, both of the two most important book trade monthly publications, Kirkus Reviews and Publisher's Weekly, reviewed the young author's latest work. Getting favorable reviews from either was the Gold Standard for predicting bestseller book success! Silas was called "the next O. Henry" and "the new Master of the Short Story." He was interviewed in The Boston Globe and featured in the New York Times Sunday Book Review. He began appearing on radio and in author podcasts. He even made several appearances on the morning news programs, getting made-up in this or that Green Room and being coached beforehand what clothing colors looked best on camera under the bright lights. His books were even selling abroad now in record numbers, and were soon being translated into various languages.

Shortly after this series of heady experiences, Silas and Lorraine got married in Newport and honeymooned for a relaxing week in the pink sands and turquoise surf of sunny Bermuda.

Everyone was happy. Money was frankly no longer a worry. Roz finally set up a major appointment for Silas at Doubleday. The editors there offered Wendell $678,000 for exclusive rights to his first novel, should he ever want to write one -- a daunting task which usually took even the best authors two or three years to complete. Silas floated the idea of his first attempt possibly being a multi-generational saga of a penniless immigrant from Poland who arrives in Chicago in 1890, and through hard work and luck, eventually becomes a millionaire steel mill magnate on the city's South Side.

And all of this was happening to an ecstatic and thankful author who had yet to celebrate his thirtieth birthday.

Yes, it was a dream come true for Silas Wendell -- the cheerful boy who cherished books and the printed word, and now the gifted, maturing man who loved the art and craft of writing and was successful at last...

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The young writer put down his pen. His story was finished. He would type it up tomorrow after work. He was employed as a library 'page' -- one who re-shelved books and did other simple duties at his local branch. He looked around his dusty, cramped studio apartment, noticing again with dismay his kitchen sink overflowing with encrusted dishes, his garbage can full with used microwave meal containers, his dirty laundry piled in a corner near the mattress on the floor where he slept.

The hopeful author had grown quite fond of the characters he had written about, as was the case with all of his stories. He knew deep inside that his work was good. If only he could become like Silas Wendell in real life! This was every budding writer's fantasy. If only one of his stories would be accepted for once, and finally published for everyone to enjoy!

If only someone with influence, somewhere, would read his creative works and realize his passion and his talent.

If only...if only!

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

August 4, 2021