Ellen Franke

Professor Holley

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Childhood Stories: Creating My Own Life Picture Through Words

As they rounded the corner, their hearts pounded out of their chests with fear. Peering around the edge of the van, Zach caught sight of it. The horrible laser zed eyes of that scaly backed creature locked with his. He turned to the other three, Michael, David, and Ellen, who breathing heavily, looked to Zach for a plan of attack. The time machine was only twenty feet from their grasp, but the alligator was an almost impenetrable force. This is how it always began, one of my grandpa’s stories that is. Ever since I was a little kid, my grandpa and father have been telling me stories. The most common ones dealt with a crab named Sandy or an alligator that guarded a time machine in my garage. However, each time one of them would create a new adventurous tale, I would pick up new words, question what they meant, and then start using them in my day-to-day life. My dad would also reverse our roles by encouraging me to tell him a story every now and then. This helped me develop a sense of creativity with my words the way I think he and my grandfather did so well. Through the process of painting pictures in my head of what both my grandpa’s and dad’s stories where depicting, I was able to piece together my own life picture storybook in which my words could describe.

My grandpa always had a talent for over exaggerating various situations. He could turn a simple experience into a one of a kind, cannot believe you did that, oh my goodness kind of story when he retold it. This ability came in handy each time he decided to take my brother’s and I on our own little adventure to the movies or the park. Each time he would make the short drive up the street to our house, my excitement was hard to contain as I heard his old fashioned navy blue Buick Lucerne, edged in gold trim rolling down the driveway. As I stepped into the backseat of that car, the familiar scents of cigar smoke and coffee mixed together pierced my nostrils. My three brothers and I would squeeze together on our coffee stained seats and wait anxiously for my grandpa to begin. Grandpa’s famous storytelling abilities were highlighted most through the adventures of the Franke family grandchildren. Specifically, each adventure tale always began in the same way: in my garage trying to get into the time machine that my grandpa apparently believed we had. However, a life-threatening alligator guarded said time machine so the action began right from the start with impressive stunts of how four children managed to escape from the fierce reptile. Particularly, I remember driving in a my grandpa’s old Buick one day with my three older brother’s on our way to see “A Bug’s Life.” At the time, I was only about five years old. I could walk and talk in full sentences, but my words were simple syllabus that I had learned through my parents and in preschool. I could merely get my thoughts across and that was the extent of my vocabulary. The story of this car ride involved my brother’s and I being transported back to the time of the pyramids in Egypt. We had to battle the powers of the sphinx and fight off red-eyed mummies. I obviously did not realize it at the time, but my grandpa was influencing my language. In the same way that he was able to embellish his ideas with colorful words and change the tone of his voice to bring in greater effects, I find myself thinking of him each time I retell a story. I attempt to entertain my audiences through hand motions, facial expressions, and various voice levels. Entering my grandpa’s car was like entering an actual time machine to the past and sometimes the future; he brought all things to life, including my language.

As opposed to my grandpa, my father has always been more reserved when it comes to sharing his personal experiences and feelings. He does not like to boast about his triumphs and does not feel the need to seek empathy when he struggles. However, each night he would come into my room to tell a story, his shy self becomes more animated than ever and I can tell that he is his father’s son. I remember the first time I heard one of my father’s “Sandy the Crab” stories. I was walking into my older brother’s room one night and I heard my dad telling two of them a story. I caught pieces of various sentences, phrases such as “Sandy had to get out now,” “All the other crabs had escaped” and “Could she do it.” I sat there staring at my brother’s who had their eyes locked my dad waiting to hear more of what must have been a pretty enticing tale. All I could think about is “Could Sandy do what?” and “Wait who is Sandy?” After my father had finished, I caught his eye, smiled, went straight up to him, and said “Can you do that for me?” He laughed and smiled and said, “Eller-Beller, it’s late and you need to go to bed, maybe some other time.” But that answer did not fly with me and with a few pretty pleases and puppy dog faces, my dad finally agreed. We went into my bedroom, snuggled under my purple and green flowered covers and he began. All I can remember from the first story of his own personal series “Sandy the Crab” was thinking wow, I want to hear more, more, more. From then on, stories of Sandy the Crab were famous in my house and my brother’s and I always wanted to hear one before we went to sleep for the night. Throughout the eight or so years of my dad telling stories, my mind and vocabulary were opened to a new world of words and possibilities. As I got older, I could tell my dad was trying to expand my knowledge by using more complicated words because I would find myself asking continuously “What does that word mean?” My father was teaching me new words in a fun and unique way. I found myself spending my free time in my grade school classroom writing short stories about Sandy and the alligator, trying to recreate the magic that occurred in each adventure I heard. At first, I did not even realize his stories were having an affect on my speech or writing. Yet, each time I found myself using a word I had first heard in a story from my father, that thought came to mind.

 Even though I had gotten to the age of about eleven, I never felt that I was too old for one of my dad’s stories. Having him lie in bed with me each night as I cuddled up with my pink blanket before I fell asleep gave me a sense of protection and made feel like I was still daddy’s little girl. I never ceased to ask if tonight could be a story night and I still got to hear one at least once a week. However, there was one particular day I remember when my dad asked me a question I was not prepared for. That night, lying in bed, I waited for my dad to begin his story. Instead of the usual “once upon a time,” my father said “Ell, why don’t you tell me a story tonight.” I was shocked and actually laughed because I thought he was kidding. I did not know how to tell stories; I could not be as creative as my grandpa or my dad. What was he expecting I was only a kid? No matter how much I begged him to tell it instead, he insisted that I try to make one up myself. With his encouragement, I was able to come up with a measly story involving a horse and a farm. However, each time he now asked me to try, I found that it became easier and easier to create new plots and exciting endings. In order to prepare for the nights when my father would refuse to enlighten me with his words, I wrote down topics and “plot mountains” for my stories to challenge my imagination and creativity. I realized that my dad had been challenging me to paint my own pictures, instead of simply envisioning ones others told.

 Growing up with this background and development has not only shaped my language, but also how I portray myself as to those around me. Just as I said I am never too old to hear one of the stories in a made up series from my childhood, I am never too old to have moments where I act like one of the characters in those stories. All of the adventures I had with my brothers throughout the years of our history are forever in my memory and remind me of how I developed my personal style of language and literacy.