2004 Second Place Personal Narrative

I Heard My Daddy Cry

I could feel the power in his superman arms. The joyful rush swept over me as he effortlessly flung me into the passenger seat. The denim blue Mercury Tracer smelled faintly of the crayons that I had accidentally melted into the back seat last year. The smell of my blunder triggered subconscious swells of excitement; this was Dad’s car. This was a great day. Not only had I gotten to have a *third* bowl of cereal, but I had missed the bus. I laughed to myself. I should find more ways to avoid sitting in the cheese wagon. Because of my “error” I would avoid the oppressive fifth grade hierarchy pushing me to the front of the bus like some inverse Rosa Parks, *and* I would get to ride with Dad!

Dad got in the other door and off we rattled down the gravel driveway, onto the packed dirt, around the car-swallowing potholes, and onto the main road. Even the lurches signaling each shift in gear were enthralling. I watched his hands maneuver the worn steering wheel and slam the stick into place with near perfection as we raced down Pontiac Drive.

I was bubbling; Ritalin might have been in order as I nearly bounced up and down in my seat. I couldn’t contain myself, question after question poured out, tapping the infinite wisdom. “What does that stick do when you move it around?”

“Well that’s the stick shift…”

“And how does the engine know what you want it to do?”

“Well, you see…” The answers were genius. I didn’t hear any of them, but they had come from Dad – true, eternal omniscience. After the multitude of questions had bombarded him, he suddenly said “Well here ya go spud, Home of the Green Gator.” My heart sank as I felt the familiar banked turn, and the half eroded speed bump roll under the bald tires. Without looking I could almost predict the second he pressed the brake, at just what point the car would rock to a… stop, and stopped we were.
“Alright Bud. Hey, do me a favor and try to be good today, especially nice to Mrs. Gilmore, K? I don’t want to hear about another trip to the office.”

“But Dad, I already told you…”

He interrupted, “Jon, she’s not a communist. I knew it was a bad sign when you chose the history channel over Saturday morning cartoons. Just be good alright?”

“Sure Dad. Have fun at work.” Once out, I watched the Tracer sputter out of view until the ugly brown brick building was all that was left to command my attention. I sighed; it wouldn’t be my last sigh of the day.

In class my mind was wandering as usual. “…that chubby Chaldean kid is hogging the monkey bars again. Lucky for him its not my recess, because…” Mrs. Gilmore called my name. Without shifting my longing gaze I replied, “No.”

Then she kept talking to me; I sighed and turned away from the window. Apparently Mrs. Gilmore thought that her multiplication tables were more important than contemplation of my takeover of the monkey bars, annexing yet another section of the playground into my mighty empire. “Yes, Jonathan, I knew you weren’t paying attention, it was a hypothetical question.”

“OK.” My sarcasm surprised me, coming out a little harsher than I had intended.

“Jonathan, need I remind you that you are in my classroom, and you will listen to me, and you will obey me, and will show me a little respect because I am the authority in this classroom, not you!”

I felt that familiar rising; the signals of the immanent outburst. It was out of my control, Gilmore had flipped the switch and I wasn’t about to let her talk to me like that. I could tell she saw the signs of the rising tide. It was no use, once past her horn rimmed glasses of hideousness the glints of warning were short lived. No amount of malevolent glares would stop Jonathan Bitter – not on the warpath, and I had just the guns to prick her where it would hurt the most. I knew just how to hit her – expose her clandestine communist connections.

“Don’t listen to her! She’s a communist! If you believe the things she tells you, you’re gonna end up a Nazi!” The burning magma cooled slightly as I had the satisfaction of seeing every Jewish kid pivot in their seats, not leaving their backs to the possible Nazi. I may have been the only kid at Green School that watched the history channel, but 20 odd sets of widened eyes told me some things were significant to everyone.
As Gilmore’s reaction exploded in the corner of my vision the cooling magma froze with a slowly evolving blend of sinking darkness, blaring sirens, and sickening terror. “OUT! OUT, And Never Come Back!! Get Your Scrawny Little Butt Out Of My Classroom!!”

I had really done it this time, I had broken the final straw. Not even I, let alone anyone in the history of Green Elementary School, had actually pushed a teacher to complete nervous breakdown. The flailing arms, the screaming, the tears, the pointing had chased me out the door and infected my imagination with visions of communist revenge. I knew I had definitely out stepped my limitations this time. Had I also known she was not legally allowed to physically kick my butt out of the classroom, I might not have made it to the door of Mrs. Shieko’s office quite so fast. I was out of breath. Looking around, I quickly scanned for threats.

There were no men in black trench coats hiding Tommy Guns. No matter how hard I looked I couldn’t see any signs that the ugly purple berber carpet was concealing launch tubes for poisoned arrows. Even the broken light at the end of the hallway failed to hang askew over an eerily placed, delinquent child sized, electric chair. I slowed my imagination to a sprint, lowered my guard to DEFCON 3, and tried to equalize the air pressure in my lungs from hyperventilation. Once my breathing had slowed, I took one deep gulp and knocked on the looming oaken door, branded in intimidating fashion with the large print, “Principal Sheiko”.

I could’ve sworn the poltergeist beckoned to me when, “Come in.” was the only reply.

I forced the terror-widened eyes to a nearly normal size and took a final deep breath before mustering the door open, surprised I was not welcomed by Cerberus. I painted a slim smile on and said “Hey Mrs. Sheiko, having a good day?”

“Oh, hello Mr. Bitter, what can I do for you?” Her face hid nothing, there was no guile veiled in the cheerful greeting, yet something was amiss. The walls had been freshly painted, it was a cunning move to throw me off guard, force me into revealing something. Shieko knew I was used to the gothic style architecture, welcoming hellions to their doom. It had been thus “decorated” on each of my other plentiful visits. She had changed the appearance on purpose, I was sure of it. Even the butterfly trim at the tops of the gay yellow walls were screening menace. I knew the friendly pretences were just a façade for her dark side, paralleled nicely with the falsely advertised colorful walls. The faint aroma of fresh paint hadn’t dulled my finely tuned senses. I saw
that she hadn’t been briefed yet. The clockwork upstairs spun to life as I realized an alternate light would be beneficial.

I began my story, “Well I was in Mrs. Gilmore’s class, looking out the window practicing multiplication tables in my head, and Mrs. Gilmore didn’t believe that I was really paying attention. So I said I was. Then I turned to look at her and asked her if she was having a good day, and all of a sudden she went mental. She started jumping around and belting out Celtic war cries,” it was going well now, I was rolling, and it was my chance to give some real credit to my theory, “then when I refused to fight her out on the field of honor she kicked me out of the classroom, saying I was not worthy of her presence. I was scared that she was going to come after me for showing the rest of the class that she was really a psycho communist queen, so I came here hoping you would restrain her and protect our class from her evil tirade.” Ha-ha! Now the adult world was truly aware of Gilmore’s link to the heads of the Axis Powers.

Mrs. Sheiko sighed, hung her head down at her desk and set the stern looking glasses down in order to rub her temples. Without looking up at me she said, “Jonathan Hayes Bitter, do not move. I am going to call Mrs. Gilmore down here and get the story. Once I have that I will be calling your father from work. I will bring him down to the school to have a conference about your outrageous behaviors, and your history of compulsive lying.”

Everything faded to an echo, “Dad? No, no he can’t. No. He cant know.” It was too late, before I came back to reality, Mrs. Gilmore’s, red, swollen, tear streaked face had related the whole story – devoid of conspiratorial tangents.

The rest of the day was spent in solitary confinement, my senses were dulled to the passing of time from the monotonous and ever so familiar, “I will not… I will not…” I was left there, the lone desk in the abandoned, windowless, side office with no hopes of escape; the only way out was through Sheiko’s office. The file cabinets were all familiar to me. It wasn’t my first time locked away, but when I heard the voice I was no longer hypnotized in my 200 sentences.

My stomach sank, and sank, swelling my toes to the point where they might have been lollipops. Then nothing. My mind was a blank filled only with the emptiness of my own misery, nothing else mattered. So what
if Gilmore hadn’t been a communist? So what if she had actually lost family to wars with various communist powers? I could hear the slouch, and that angered look of disappointment through the metal door. It was obvious he knew what had happened now. It was obvious judgment day had come.

Before I had time to snap out of the lifeless sorrow, the door squeaked open and the large frame was silhouetted against the harsh light intruding through Sheiko’s window. I could hear the laughter now, the other kids out at recess. I never got out there today. His thick arms were folded across his chest, jaw clamped. “Let’s go Jon” There were no playful grins on his face. He turned and walked towards the outer door. I followed in his tracks, averting my eyes from Mrs. Sheiko who had taken a similar haunting stance, arms clasped, jaw set. Not getting any other acknowledgments of presence I stepped out into the hall, and on, out into the running car.

“I… I’m…. Dad?” My faltering calls for some sort of reassurance went completely ignored. I sunk, my body, my heart, my head and my soul, sunk. The familiar sounds and forestry images passed, head hung too low to notice. The overbearing silence was punctuated only by the whining shift of gears. The moments dragged on; silence did all the communicating.

Too soon we were weaving around the car swallowing potholes, crunching over the gravel driveway, halted; the car was off. Soon we were out of the car and in the house. I expected rage, I expected punishment, I expected spanking and lectures. I did not expect the sorrowful look as my dad turned to me, shook his head and went in his room.

I knew it was useless to pretend it didn’t happen, not to mention it. I had to go talk to him, apologize, promise it will never happen again. I slowly walked to his room, making sure not to intrude, to be invited in before entering, to be entirely submissive. I went to knock on the door, noticing for the first time the grubby hand prints and scars along the bottom of the door. Before I could knock I heard something that startled me.

I heard crying. I’d seen Mom cry. She always cried in church, and sometimes if we fought too much. It wasn’t Mom. It was a quiet, sorrowful cry, not gasping, loud and grating like Mom’s. I might not have even known that it was crying had he not spoken in broken breaths. “When – when will he change? Have we – what did we do wrong?” Everything slowed, the world stopped, mine stopped. Change necessitates such pauses. My
dad was crying, he wasn’t joking, laughing, throwing me in the air, effortlessly guiding, assuring – no, it wasn’t any of that. I heard my dad cry.