Honors Thesis Proposal

Creative Non-Fiction: Situated Memoir

It was mid-November and I was wearing that itchy wool hat and those thick, red gloves I always hated. I used to pretend I lost them or hide them so I didn’t have to wear them, but somehow they always turned up when my mother went looking. It was that time in my life when I hadn’t grown in about three years, tragically caught on the cusp of puberty, and I wanted more than anything just to see my teeth again without metal wires and brackets bracing them. I was almost your typical seventh grade boy – not so popular with the ladies, curly hair, skinny except for that inner tube of baby fat around my hips – but my role as an older brother set me apart. My English teachers used to tell me I was mature for my age: I suppose that was because I was quiet and wrote short stories about characters that underwent some sort of moral revelation or had a mental disorder. Not really the stuff of junior high prose.

So – back to the story – I was walking along the Wells Beach shore (in southern Maine) with my mother, my father, and my eight-year-old autistic brother, Mikey. I was trying to figure the number of days until Christmas. (38.) “Cayce, keep an eye on Mikey, now. Don’t let him get too far ahead of you.” I was always my brother’s keeper. Always. Where Mikey went, I went. And at that particular moment, Mikey was headed for the rising tide, rushing to meet the frothy swell rolling in.

“Mikey!” I shouted, out-striding him step for step. Another high-speed chase between brothers. “Mikey, stop!” But he ignored me, running until he was just out of the wave’s long reach and I caught him by the wrist. “You can’t just take off like that, pal. You have to wait for me.” I looked to him for some kind of response, some simple
acknowledgement, but he just glanced at me blankly and turned back to the water, clapping his hands. He moaned loudly, mimicking the roaring tide, jumping and clapping, jumping and clapping. His Velcro shoes pressed back down into the sandy earth, and he squeezed his hands together, hunching over and grinding his teeth. This was happiness for Mikey; and confusion; and frustration, all at once. There was a thin smile on his face, but questions in his eyes, buried in a squint.

I wished that for once – once – I could have told him what he wanted to hear. That somehow my answers would have aligned with the questions he posed in his thoughts, forming appropriate responses. That I could have been the big brother I wanted to be.

Maybe Mikey wanted only to share that moment with me, tell me how much he loved visiting the beach and that we should do it more often. Maybe he wanted to ask how big the ocean is, or if anyone ever swam all the way across. Maybe he wanted to apologize for the way he was. For his autism. All of this was racing through my mind, flooding my brain. Everything else in the world seemed still, even the rippling water. Looking for something profound to say, I stood there, speechless, looking for words in a broken, clouded sky. I found nothing. And when I went to rest my hand on Mikey’s shoulder – a trademark brotherly gesture, to be sure – he was gone. I could hear him: already far away, howling, he was chasing the foamy ocean’s edge and fighting the wind with his outstretched hands.

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This is my story. It is the story of a boy and his parents at the mercy of his sibling’s disorder; my parents and I have built our lives around Mikey, willingly. We know no other life. My father gave up his career and stays home with Mikey because Mikey has outbursts and tantrums that become dangerous. These violent episodes leave my father, mother, and myself with fingernail gashes in our arms or bruises on our legs. My father, while I am away at school, is the only one who can handle Mikey until he calms down. My parents and I don’t trust anyone else to take care of him. We’re afraid that if anyone outside of our immediate family saw one of Mikey’s fits of confusion and rage, we could lose him. Someone would think he isn’t fit to live at home, that he isn’t safe and should be institutionalized. And what is the answer? Can anyone care for Mikey better than I, or my parents, can – the people who know him better than anyone else? Can anyone else show him love? Compassion? What treatments for individuals on the more severe end of the autism spectrum, like Mikey, have been proven effective? Or is it all just shades of gray? My thesis will be an exploration of these questions, among others, and will rely on scene to navigate through all of the possible answers. I am proposing to write a situated memoir, grounding it in the settings and illuminating moments from my past that speak to my experiences attempting to educate Mikey and treat his autism.

This is a story that needs to be written because I want my readers to understand that Mikey is not a burden on my parents or myself. He is not a nuisance or a hindrance in the grander scheme of our lives, holding us back. I want readers to see that Mikey is the keystone of my family, bringing us together, binding us together in a lifelong challenge to overcome autism. My parents, Mikey, and I are all affected, and like the puzzle pieces that have come to represent the autism disorder, we are the pieces to one
story. From the perspective of my own piece, I aspire to speak for the whole puzzle, illustrating the image on the box that no one else has seen quite the way I have.