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English 3 4th Period

Feher

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The Two Ls

My father told me recently, sometime in June, that he cheated his way through high school.

For my entire life, every time he saw me with a book—which was often—he made a point to tell me that he wasn’t a reader. “Oh. You're reading again. I just can’t do that.” “How do you read so much? Don’t you want to go outside?” I always took his ‘can’ts’ as ‘don’t-want-to's’, as judgements against my own personality. But in June I learned the truth.

My 59-year-old father, whose sons grew up to be a surgeon and a claims adjuster and whose daughter has a Master's in English and teaches it for a living, cannot read.

My dad grew up in a town whose population was under 1,000 people. An intimate community where every family knew each other. Everyone’s dad hunted together. Everyone’s mom shared casserole recipes. Every child went to the same elementary, middle, and high school. In such a small town, you think it would be hard to go unnoticed. Especially if you are a part of the Feher family—who's names mark three of the five main streets of the town: Feher Drive, Ann Drive, and Frank Street. But somehow, my dad was able to float just under the radar, buoyed by my family’s popularity, which is miraculous considering my grandpa’s line of work.

My father’s father—Frank Feher—was a big deal in tiny Montrose, Michigan. He taught shop and coached football, basketball, and baseball at Hill-Mcloy High school. At his funeral, all 1000+ of Montrose’s population showed up to offer our family condolences. He was loved. Revered. It was his funeral that gave me the final encouragement to jump into teaching. Countless former students told my brothers and I how much our grandpa meant to them both in the classroom and on the field.

My father and his older brother, Frank Feher Jr., worshipped my grandpa. He coached them in all three sports throughout their time in school and showered them in love and high expectations.

Yet, my father cannot read. Or rather, he cannot comprehend. He can order from a menu at a restaurant, but he cannot decode a pun on a birthday card. He can read enough of a job application to get a job, but he cannot pass the training courses to get promotions. He can text simple sentences, but he cannot hold discussion via email. One reason, probably, that he still owns a flip phone.

Since finding this out, I find myself watching my students in my classroom. In the hallways. In the cafeteria. My high school population is two times the size of my father’s hometown. How many of my students have flown under the radar in my own classroom. How many have I let down by not catching their difficulty with comprehension? Or see their struggles yet not having the proper tools to aid them. What disservice am I fulfilling?

Or—rather—am I fulfilling a disservice at all? Has my father's life, or even my life, been lesser because of his illiteracy? I’m not sure.

I cannot remember my father reading to me as a child. Yet I know that I was read to. And I know that I was loved.

My parents separated when I was in fifth grade, one semester before my mother was set to graduate from Trevecca University with her Bachelor's degree. Like my father, my mother didn’t go to college right after high school. For her, college wasn’t an option to girls in her family. The only option was finding a husband and having babies, so that’s what she did. But when her mother-in-law became too overbearing, Mom forced our father to take advantage of the Saturn plant opening in Tennessee, effectively moving our family 800 miles away from the small-town rules of rural Michigan and into the rolling hills of opportunity for herself and her children. My dad could have benefited from these opportunities as well, if he had been able to identify his comprehension disorder.

My mother’s pending graduation created a sense of inferiority in my father, who struck out on his own to find his masculinity in another woman’s arms.

Did illiteracy cause my parent’s divorce?

Did illiteracy cause the major traumas of my childhood?

I’m not sure; however, I do know that the root to my trauma was not lack of love. I believe my father finally confessed this very personal secret to me precisely because of how much he loves me. And maybe, a little, because of my chosen profession.

Since our discussion, we have scheduled to have my father tested for learning disabilities with a trained psychologist and I plan to support him every step of the way just like he stood with me through every bad play performance, every petty break up, and every self-inflicted scar of my high school and college years. His constant support has made me the human being I am today. I can’t wait for him to read this.