

Mike and the Bedtime Book

I stood and shared this story with the rest.

Her child was young, that Tabby. The child was clothed in the regular "let's go to bed" full covered pajamas. Complete with the built-in "feetsies" and the zipper down the center of her small body. She met me at the back door and opened it to let me into their home.

"Mom!! Mike's here!!"

Off in the distance, I heard the "Shit!! ...I mean Damn!!... oh..." and as the verbage got louder, we both met each other at the center counter. She kissed me quick on the lips and said "If you don't wanna get burned, steer clear!" She then turned to her young charge and said "And you -- didn't we say "good night" about an hour ago?"

"Mommy...read me a bedtime story!!" she wailed as she moved toward the living room.

I looked at Tabby's mother. Wearing only a pair of underwear and a large sports teeshirt, I could clearly tell that she had no further clothing under it. She moved quickly as she deposited a pan into the sink, then turning on the water only to witness the steam and sizzle from the hot surface meeting the cool water.

"Sorry Mike, it's been that kind of a day around here. I just got her fed and off to bed I thought..."

I held up my left hand and said "Don't worry about it, Faye...is there anything I can do to help you?"

She looked at me for about three seconds and said, "Read Tabby a story."

My personal experience in reading bedtime stories was checkered. I chose not to tell a lot of people about it, because, well, it was embarrassing.

Still is.

When I was in school, my teachers -- nor my Aunt Dallas who took care of me as I was growing up -- never read to me or the other students. We were given words to learn but I never used those words in written stories about my life until now. As far as reading those words in books or newspapers, that did not occur until after my second divorce.

My first wife turned me onto the Little Golden Books after I made a fool of myself and confused the Three Little Pigs and the Goldielocks stories. I was convinced that the Three Little Pigs had porriage, slept on uncomfortable beds, and had a little girl who wanted to somehow eat each one after she huffed and puffed and blew down their shacks of various building materials.

She publically embarrassed me when she asked me to "tell" her girlfriend and her husband about the "Three Little Pigs". Then she proceeded to never let me forget about it, having a great laugh at my personal expense.

Since then, I never read or told a bedtime story to anyone and when the discussion turned that way, I quickly made my exit or became interested in whatever was on the television. The marriage did not last long afterwards either.

The second wife took great pity upon me when she found my stack of Little Golden Books hidden in a box. I should have tossed them out with the other crap belonging to the first wife; but being the pack-rat I was and still am, I retained them for some reason I don't truthfully know.

The second wife took the time to read the stories to me over the four years we were married and talked with me about how the stories came to being -- at least her concept. She was a humanities teacher at the local community college.

You hear of people "bullshitting" their way into a job -- that was me. I convinced two professors and a university dean three years ago that I had the skills and knowledge to teach automotive arts to high school graduates, many of whom have read Hemmingway and Bates. Who knew and could converse about the basics of economics and Presidential politics. And who could write nice letters complete with words like "negotiation" and "topography" .

I got my education from television and the radio. And I never read any of those Little Golden Books -- they were read to me. The books went to Goodwill two weeks after the second divorce was final and I came to get my "crap" from her home.

With all of that emotional and physical baggage, I am now being asked by the woman I intend on making my third -- and hopefully last -- wife, to read a bedtime story to her precious child.

"Okay. Where's the book?"

She wiped her hands clean with the cloth attached to the rings of one of the cabinets and turned to meet me. "Let me show you the one we like."

My stomach started to churn as she led the way past the kitchen to the living room and the shelf by the television set.

"You don't have to read too much...just until she goes to sleep."

I nodded, adding, "I know..." thinking to myself, "just like they do on TV..."

Tabby's mother found the thick book and handed it to me.

"Be careful...it's a family heirloom...and whatever you do, DON'T LET HER HAVE IT!!"

I opened the book and glanced down. I rubbed my eyes with the back of one of my hands, and looked again.

I turned the pages back and forth. Each page was a yellowed-edged entry.

Each page was empty. As in no type, no photos, nothing. Blank page after page.

"You sure you've got the right book, honey? There's nothing on these pages!" I almost yelled, even though my sweetie was right beside me.

"Shhhhhh...I know. This was my mother's book. She couldn't read, so she found this book and put a real fancy cover on it. She would read to me from this book every night until I turned 11 -- and she hid the book so I couldn't find out the truth. I've been reading to Patricia -- Tabby -- out of this book since she was two."

"So how do you keep the stories straight, Faye??" I asked her in a lower tone.

"I told her that we don't repeat the stories -- that I would read to her a new story every night. As you can see, the book's pretty thick."

She touched my hand, still holding the book. "You can do this. My mother never learned how to read English and so, she made up the stories she told me. You can read her something else if you like..."

I interrupted her and said "No...I'll read her something from this book. This is what she expects."

"I'm going to finally take that shower I started on before all hell broke loose here..." she said as she sauntered her way to the master bedroom. I looked at the book. From the outside, it looked like one of those massive childhood books, full of graphic illustrations of various characters. The cover was put together carefully and the binding even had "Our Special Stories" in some Old English gold type.

I walked with the book into the child's room and found the rocking chair her mother used as her platform for reading from. I placed the book down on the chair and looked at the child. She was half asleep but as I pulled the covers up around her and smoothed her matted brown hair, she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Momma's gonna read me a story", she said.

"No, your mom needs a break. I'm going to read to you from the book over there..."

The little girl looked at me and sighed. Then she said "Okay."

"What was the last story she read to you?" I asked because I did not want to attempt the same story again.

"The beanstalk story. Fee Fi Foam", she responded. She turned onto her back completely and waited for me to sit down in the chair. I moved my fingers through the pages of the book, trying to find any letters -- anything at all -- which reminded me of a story.

I had no stories which came up from my many evenings of sitting and listening to the second wife share classic children's tales with me. I could not remember them. I pretended that someone was about to electrocute me if I did not come up with details -- let alone a name -- of a nursery tale or rhyme or something.

I finally found the page I wanted to start from.

"This story is called Mike and the Bedtime Book." I looked over the top edge of the old book and watched as a pair of eyes looked back at me and then closed as her hands folded across her tiny body.

"As stories go," I said, "there was a young man named Mike. He was smart. He could tear anything apart and put it back together in no time flat. He learned everything he could from his father, who could also tear anything apart and put it back together and make them work. At night time, Mike would ask his father to read him a story -- a bedtime story -- but his father said..." and then I changed my voice, making it deeper, "No boy of mine will get a bedtime story. That's for sissies! Besides, I have no book to read to you!"

I looked over to see how I was doing. The tiny girl was still awake.

"So there was a big contest put on by the King. And builders would come from all over the land to compete - and the prize was a special book of stories, handed down from one family to the next, with stories about princes and princesses. About little red hens and pigs and other kinds of animals. About talking apples and horses and cows. Stories which, if you read them, would give you the keys to the world."

I turned the page.

"There was an entry fee -- two gold coins. Mike paid the sheriff the two gold coins and the man placed the coins into a large bag and tied it up.

"You will be a good person in this contest," the Sheriff stated. "I have seen you build things and you are very good at it." The sheriff, knowing that Mike could win, did not turn in the money to the tax man and instead kept the money for himself.

So on the day of the big contest, Mike appeared at the gates to the castle and the tax man told him that he did not have his name written down as being paid."

"I did pay," Mike stated, "I paid the Sheriff."

"You are not written down in the book, so you can't come in and compete" the tax man said. Two large guards came and escorted Mike and his tools back out and away from the castle."

I looked over and the little girl quietly asked, half asleep, "so what did he do?"

"Mike was sad. He was crying. But as he walked back home that evening, he saw a small bag of something and almost tripped over it. He walked back, looked at the bag, and discovered it was the same bag that the Sheriff had earlier.

"This is a great day for me after all!!" Mike said as he opened and closed the bag up. Then, he remembered what his father taught him:

"Think about how you would be if someone did this to you."

Mike quickly carried the bag back to the gates and knocked on the walls to get someone to open it up.

I turned the page.

"A guard came to the gate and asked "What are you doing here? You were told you cannot come in -- you do not have the money!"

"I do have the money. It is not mine, though." Mike answered. The guard opened the gate and the tax man came out. "What do you mean you have the money?"

"I found this. This belongs to the sheriff. It is not my money but I am sure he is looking for it."

"What a fool you are!" the tax man said. "You could have come in here and paid for your fee and still had all of this money left!"

"But I would not be able to show how good of a builder I am. I would have money but no fun. And I want to earn that book, take it home, and have my father to read to me from it every night of my life."

I looked up to see if my story was doing the job. It did. The little girl was sleeping still, her tiny body breathing in and out as she was away in sleepy-bye-land.

"So what happened?" Tabby's mom startled me a little as I pulled myself from the narrow chair softly.

I waited until I turned off the light and then turned around and kissed the small girl on her forehead. I then turned back around and walked out of the child's room.

"And he won the contest, his daddy read the book to him every night of his life, and he lived happily ever after", I said after closing the door and handing Faye the book.

"You can't read, can you?"

Cornered, I lowered my head and answered, "I can read some. Not a whole lot. How did you know?"

"You were reading the book to her upside down," she answered, placing the book back onto the shelf in the living room. "No matter -- I think she was too tired to realize it, though."

She then kissed me on my forehead.

As I found my seat, one person from the backroom started clapping and pretty soon, the rest of the room all joined him and stood and continued to clap. Tears fell from the corners of my eyes as some of them wiped tears from their eyes as well...They did so for a good half of a minute and then they stopped.

"Thank you for sharing..."