

Michael David Lukas

## Bedtime Story

Every night it's the same thing. First pajamas. Then wash-your-hands-wash-your-face-brush-your-teeth. Then books, a story, and a song. Each kid chooses two books and the song is the same every night. But the story, that's up for negotiation.

When they were younger they wanted stories about fairies and princesses and talking animals. Now they want real stories. They want to know about when I was their age, how I met H, when I was a teenager, when I didn't listen to my parents. They want stories to help them make sense of the world, stories to hold what they don't understand. And who can blame them? Isn't that what stories are for?

When they skin their knees or drop their juice or don't get what they want, they ask for stories about when I skinned my knee or dropped my juice or didn't get what I wanted. Tell me a story, they say, still unable to stop crying, about when you were a little guy.

On the internet I find a quote, attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh. We need someone to be able to listen to us and to understand us, then we will suffer less. On another site, the same words are attributed to another Buddhist teacher, Susan Moon. I guess it doesn't really matter, who said it. Maybe they both did.

M's favorite story is the one about when I ate a mushroom. I was three years old, on a hike with my best friend and his mom. I don't remember actually eating the mushroom. What I remember most is not remembering. My friend's mom, kneeling down to my level. Can you tell me what it looked like? she asks. Try to remember. It's very important. I tell her what I think she wants to hear. It was a little white mushroom with a red cap. The kind you see in cartoons.

You shouldn't have eaten that mushroom, A says. And you should have tried harder to remember.

A's favorite story is the one about when my mom, Lala, came to North America.

She was five years old and had never been on a boat before. It's a two-week journey, from Paris to New Orleans. And she's sick the whole way. She throws up in her cabin, in the bathroom, over the side of the boat. Halfway through the trip she tells her parents that she doesn't like North America. She wants to go home. The punchline being that she thinks the boat is North America.

But why did they have to leave? M asks one night as she's falling asleep. Why couldn't they just go back home?

They want to hear the same stories over and over again, which I understand. There's a comfort in repetition. When I was in my early twenties, a Van Morrison tape got stuck in the stereo system of the old Volvo my step mom let me borrow for the summer. Not even his best album, not even top three. Still, I got a little thrill every time I turned on the car. Into the mystic again and again. The tape looping back on itself at the end with a little clicking sound. Half a mile from the county fair and the rain came pouring down. I try this as a bedtime story, but it doesn't work. In part because there's no plot. In part because M and A can't get past the idea that music used to be contained on little pieces of plastic.

While A is napping, M and I listen to audiobooks on my computer. The Secret Garden is first. I'm pretty sure I've read it before. But I don't remember the beginning, how the main character is left to fend for herself after her parents die in a cholera outbreak. Nobody thought of her, nobody wanted her, and strange things happened of which she knew nothing. . . She only knew that people were ill and that she heard mysterious and frightening sounds. Later, she goes out to find some food, drinks a glass of wine and falls asleep in her nursery. The next day, she's discovered there amidst a pile of dead bodies. There was no one in the bungalow but herself and the little rustling snake.

Is all this too close to home? I ask M if she wants to keep listening and she nods. She doesn't fully understand the book. What's an Ayah? she asks. What's a moor? Why are the servants talking like that? But there's something dark and mysterious at the heart of the book. In that darkness, she can tell, there's a truth that's been withheld.

My grandmother used to tell a story about when the Nazis came to her town. Not a story so much as the distillation of a particular moment. She was standing on a hill, watching the synagogue she had grown up in burn to the ground.

It was in this moment that she understood. The life she had left at the bottom of the hill was gone forever. When you see something like that, she would say, you can never forget it.

For dinner it's either avocado toast, pizza, or noodles. In the car it's either Frozen or My Little Pony. And every night it's the same song. There once was a little kitty cat one day/ his name was Timothy Two/ he was friends with a doggie/ who jumped all over you.

They know what's going on, A's preschool teacher says. They don't know, but they know. We watch A making sand pies in the play kitchen under the slide. She sets out each one, neat as can be. Then when the table is full, she sweeps them all onto the ground and starts over. It's going to take a lot of play to work through this, her teacher says. At least a hundred hours.

Empathy isn't just something that happens to us, writes Leslie Jamison. It's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves.

M and I make a fort in her room with sheets and broomsticks. Then we climb into our sleeping bags and listen to *The Secret Garden*. When the book is finished, I ask what she wants to listen to next. Maybe *Doctor Doolittle* or *A Wrinkle in Time*? No, she says, thumb in her mouth. I want to listen to *The Secret Garden*. Again? Again.

One night A wakes up screaming. She's sitting up in bed, gripping the sheets. No Mama, no, she shouts. The next morning we ask her what she was dreaming about. She doesn't remember. Or maybe she just doesn't want to tell us.

According to E.M. Forster, story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence, while plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. The king died and then the queen died. That's a story. The king died and the queen died of grief. That's a plot.

It would be nice if there were more plot to these past few years, a stronger sense of cause and effect. Maybe someone to blame. One night after I tell the mushroom story, M rolls over to look at me. Is that what happened to Mama's tummy? she asks. Is that why she needed to go to the hospital?

After months of not writing, months of not being able to write, an editor asks me to contribute to an anthology about loneliness. I know what I'm supposed

to write, what the editor has in mind. Or at least I can guess. A light-hearted, contemplative piece about H's cancer, the loneliness of going through chemo with two young kids, of being surrounded by people who love you, who want nothing more than to help, and yet feeling utterly alone. But I can't do it. Not yet. Hopefully not ever. Because there's only one way a story like that can work. It needs to have an ending, to give it shape.

How's the writing going? my mom asks. Good, I say. Pretty good.

A story I haven't quite figured out how to tell: When I was four or five, my dad took me to see the remnants of a car he crashed. I imagine he was working on the fifth step. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. When I ask what happened, how he crashed the car, he says that he wasn't paying attention, something about reaching for a microwave burrito from 7-Eleven. Even then, I can tell this isn't the real story. There's something suspicious about the specificity of the burrito.

On the other hand, if I were to read that description in a student's story, I would probably underline it and write something encouraging in the margin. Nice detail!

A broken heart, says the Ba'al Shem Tov, is the ax that opens all the gates of heaven. And what is parenthood but having your heart broken again and again?

One day, when it's my turn with the kinderpod, the kids see a shopping list I wrote. Lemons. Oat milk. Blueberries. I can read that, one of them says, eager to show off his reading skills. Picking up the list, he squints at my messy handwriting, then shakes his head. You teach writing?

M mixes up her bs and her ds. Her fours are backward and the letters all scrunch up in the corner. Like they were drawn there by a magnet. At our parent teacher conference, her teacher asks when she learned to walk. Did she ever crawl? Apparently crawling is very important. It helps to connect the two halves of the brain.

Later, I watch her trying to count the apples on the screen. There are seven—four plus three—but she's just guessing. Two apples? Eight apples? Try again, says a cheerful alien in the corner. Pay attention this time.

As we tell stories about the lives of others, writes Martha Nussbaum, we learn

to imagine how another creature might feel in response to various events. At the same time, we identify with the other creature and learn something about ourselves.

My grandpa never told stories about the war, though sometimes they came out. One time, when I was six, he took me to the bathroom at a restaurant. Pulling down my pants, I hop up onto the bare seat. You don't use the paper? he asks, pointing at the toilet seat cover. No, I say and finish up. He doesn't say anything more but I can see his disappointment. Later, I tell my mom what happened. Had I done something wrong? Grandpa lost his entire family in the war, she says, by way of explanation. His mom, his dad, his aunts and uncles, everyone except his older brother. I look down at my plate, not sure how to respond. What does any of this have to do with a toilet seat cover?

Monday night is movie night. But before movie night can begin we have to choose what to watch. This typically involves at least four trailers, a lot of arguing, usually some tears. The biggest point of contention is that A doesn't want to watch anything scary. She thinks everything is scary, M protests. Not that she isn't scared herself. The difference is that M understands how the stories work—that everything will work out in the end—while A doesn't.

That night I tell them a story about when I went to a movie called *The Never Ending Story*. The only thing I remember about the movie itself is a big flying worm. That, and standing in the hallway of the movie theatre with my step dad, trying to convince him that I want to go home. It's just a movie, he says. The monsters are pretend. I know, I say. What I don't know how to tell him is that it's not the monster. It's the title of the movie that scares me, the idea of a story that never ends.

Character is action, I tell my students, quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald. Or maybe it's the other way around. Action is character. Either way, the lesson is the same. Personality begets plot, which in turn creates personality. And so on. And so forth. Our stories are all wound up inside us. Waiting for the right moment to spring loose.

We talk about the shape of stories. About arcs and pyramids, but also spirals and fractals, ocean gyres and birds' nests. Are you an architect or a gardener, I ask, a macro planner or a micro manager? Or are you something else? We talk about all this, question the frameworks, upend the categories. But in the end, I tell them, the thing that really matters is where you begin.