

Mike and Mr. Milt

Blank expressions morphed into thoughtful reflections that fall afternoon when I asked my students to tell us about the first time that they understood the power of the written word. Some foreheads wrinkled; some heads leaned sideways; other heads nodded with smiling lips. Then, Mike raised his hand to tell his story. As he recreated that summer experience for his classmates and me, he quickly slipped into the language of his childhood.

“It’s Friday, Mike. Fish day,” Mama said at breakfast that day. It was just me and my mama left at the table. My big brothers had already went out to play.

“I’m going to be busy this morning and I want to you stop the fish man when the truck goes by,” Then she stood up and started stacking the breakfast dishes. She’d be busy all day and she wanted me, five-year-old Mike, to stop Mr. Milt, the fish man.

I remember when we first met Mr. Milt. My older brothers was playing in the side yard with a bunch a they friends. I just tagged along, joining in when they let me; watching when they wouldn’t. On one of the first warm days of summer, we was building something out there when we heard the funny clinkle, clangle of a ice cream wagon. For us that sound was the real start of summer. So, even though we didn’t have no money to buy nothing that day, we sure wanted to see what we was missing. We run down the shaded driveway to the edge of the road and waited for the slow moving truck to make its way ‘round the corner and past our house. The big boys tumbled around a bit, bopped each other in the arm and bragged about all the different kinds a ice cream and Popsicles they’d bought in past summers. As usual, I hung around, watching, and listening.

The jingle of the bells got closer and soon the white truck turned the corner. It was the kinda truck with the small door on the side that swooshed cool air when you opened it on sunny summer days. The big boys waved they arms wildly and the truck pulled up to the curb. “What kind you got?” ast my brother.

“What kind you want?” ast the driver, shifting the truck into park and swinging open the door. Out climbed Mr. Milt. Instead of the clean white uniform and a neat white cap, that big ole man wore faded green work pants. He had on a dingy, clean bib apron. It flapped down 'round his knees. His cap was crumbly soft with a bill that curved down around his sweating forehead. It looked like he rolled the cap in his hands lots a times before squashing it down on topa his head. The pudgy man marched 'round to the little refrigerator door and swung it open. “What kind you want?” he ast again, reaching his hand inside.

You can imagine how mad we was when instead of Creamsicles or Popsicles, we saw flapped 'cross his hand the scaly white stomach of a slippery fish! Yuch!

“Aw, shoot,” moaned the guys. “We thought you was the ice cream man.”

“How come you got a ice cream truck?”

“How come you ring bells like a ice cream man?”

“You tryna fool us?”

“That ain't fair.”

“Sorry to disappoint you fellas,” the man said, putting the fish back inside and shutting the door.

“I'm Mr Milt. I bought this truck from a frienda mine. I need something to keep the fish cool in so I can keep them cool when I drive 'round to the neighborhoods. The bells was on the truck already, so I use 'em. People can hear me from a long ways off. Well, go ast you mammas do they wanna buy somma my fish? They fresh.”

Disappointed, but glad that Mr. Milt wasn't mad at us when he saw we wasn't real customers, my brothers sent me back up the driveway to get our mama. They thought she would rather buy the fish here than walk all the way to the market. Well, she did buy his fish that day and most Fridays the rest of that summer. When my brothers wasn't home, my mama usually was the one who got Mr. Milt to stop. That day, though, she ast me to do it.

How could I, a scrawny kid, stop that big ole truck! He probably wouldn't even see me standing there on the side of the road. He probably wouldn't even stop for a five year kid! I sat down on the back steps to think about what to do.

Bob, my oldest brother and his friends was on the safety patrol at school. Them big boys wore a white belt that heng down they shoulders, cross they stomachs, then 'round they waists. Alla them carried a long stick with a red, not round/not square sign up at the top. Whenever the boys held they signs up, all the cars stopped. Alla them - coming from all four directions - just stopped! I didn't have a belt like they wore, but maybe I could make me a sign like they had.

I peeked through the back door to see if Mama was still in the kitchen doing dishes. She wasn't. I looked in the window to see if she was dusting in the dining room. She wasn't. Good. She wouldn't see me go down cellar to Daddy's workshop. That's where I could make me a sign that would stop the fish man's truck.

The door to Daddy's cellar workshop was outside. It was heavy, but I lifted it. I walked down eleven steps in the dark, feeling the walls with my hands searching for the light switch. I'd seen Daddy do it lots a times. I wasn't afraid going down there, even of the skittering mice. I was gonna help Mama that day. I was gonna make a sign that would stop the fish man's truck.

Standing on my tippy-toes, I flicked on the light. It was surprisingly bright. It washed away the shadows and I could see my Daddy's long workbench. It had lots a tools and I knew how to use mosta them. I'd seen Daddy working lots a times. All his tools was hung on the wall above his bench. He'd even painted white shapes of each tool so he could tell exactly when one was missing. He could see where to put back a screwdriver when you was finished screwing with it. It was really neat.

I looked around until I saw a two by something piece a wood to use for my sign handle. It felt good in my hand. Next I found a flat not round/not square piece to nail to the top. It didn't look quite the same shape as the sign the safety patrol boys used ... but it would do. I had to climb up on toppa the worktable to get to the jars with

the nails and to the hammer on the tool board. No problem. There was a stool sitting right in front - the one I stood on when Daddy worked down there. I got what I needed. I laid the two by something stick on the bench and put the flat piece right on top of it. I pounded the nail into place. It was crooked ... but it would do.

The sign looked pretty good!

“Oh!” I remembered, there was something written on the patrol boys’ sign. No problem. I knew where to find Daddy’s pencil. He kept one in the drawer right under the bench top. I had to climb down. Then, I had to yank to open the drawer. It nearly come out of the hole, but I stopped it with my chest. I found a nubby pencil. I laid it on top of the bench, and then used my whole body to shove the drawer back in. I put the pencil behind my ear like my Daddy did. This was just until I pushed the stool back into place and climbed back up to write my sign.

I wished I hadda had some red paint so I coulda made it look more like my brother’s sign, but I didn’t see no paint and I didn’t have no time. I could hear the clanging bells. I had to hurry if I was going to get done. I had to get out there before Mr. Milt turned the corner. I really wanted fish that day. Anyway, Mama was depending on me.

Now, what should I write? I pulled the pencil from behind my ear and wrote out my sign. I tipped it up to check it out. For some reason, the wormily squiggle lines I wrote didn’t look nothing like what was on safety patrol boys’ sign.

“Oh!” I remembered. “I don’t know how to write. I need help”. So, forgetting I was doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing and working somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be working, I grabbed my sign. I ran up the cellar stairs. I stumbled up the back porch stairs dragging the sign, and bumped into the kitchen. Mama was back in there washing something at the kitchen sink.

“Mama,” I huffed.

“Yes, Mike,” she answered not turning around. “What do you want?”

“I need you to write me a sign so I can stop the fish man!”

Instead of asking what I was doing or where I’d been, Mama just shook the water from off her hands. She dried her hands on her apron then took the pencil from my grubby fingers.

“What must I write, Mike?”

“Write “STOP.” Just like on Bob’s patrol boys’ sign. Write quick so I can stop the fish man.”

She did, and I did and we all had fresh fish that night. My age or my size didn’t matter that day ‘cause I’d had in my hands the power of the written word.

As he finished his story, Mike nodded his head in satisfaction. He seemed to have enjoyed recalling that long ago summer day. The rest of the class smiled, too, and soon other students raised their hands to add to the discussion their earliest memories of their wonder of words.