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Pappyland Forever

KELLEY BARRETT

According to my mother, I had an internal clock that woke me every morning at 5:00 to watch *Pappyland*, an ecstasy-induced, live action children’s show featuring Pappy Drewitt, a suspicious yet enthusiastic hillbilly with a real knack for drawing and interacting with small children. Pappy and his peculiar friends inhabited Pappyland, which he created using a magical pencil and the free time his failed art career allowed for.

When they weren’t learning life lessons from a talking paintbrush, a turtle fresh off the boat from Italy, or a beaver in a propeller hat, children were encouraged to draw along with Pappy. He would often start out with merely a squiggle on a piece of paper, which could turn into anything from a snake, to a rope, to a full-blown but slightly wobbly circle. Anything was possible in Pappyland, which is something Pappy said roughly twelve times per episode. In this land, you could color outside the lines. You could create and recreate with reckless abandon. You could even tell someone it was “blue after two” and it would be received as a legitimate measurement of time. I became immersed in this intoxicating Eden of imagination, inspired by the limitless possibilities and thrilled by the genuine disregard for the objective bounds of reality.

Our refrigerator soon became cluttered with the

pencil-drawn tour de forces I myself deemed worthy of public acclaim. “Wow, look at that detail!” my mother would exaggerate, shooting a smile in my direction before taking the milk out. I began distributing my artwork on the street, meaning I would put drawings in my elderly neighbor’s mailbox without her asking. I would watch from my window as her car pulled into the driveway, anticipating her excited reaction. She would bring the illustration over to the house later in the evenings for me to autograph.

“And who should I make this one out to?” I teased, pretending that the scribbles somehow translated to my name in cursive. For all intents and purposes, I was Van Gogh on the verge of an ear slicing. I drew everything I could possibly imagine, often accompanying the drawings with stories. “The Mystery at the Museum” was my debut short story, which chronicled the curious case of missing bones at a dinosaur exhibit. My readers, who consisted of four family members and two neighbors, praised the work, unanimously noting that they *never* expected the culprit to be the unassuming, purple-polka-dotted Dalmatian with three prior arrests.

Whether I was doodling along with Pappy or making clay figurines to go along with a short story on talking mice oppressed in a world geared towards humans, I was creating and imagining, chronicling it all in a handmade journal. Thanks to Pappy, I walked through my very small world with my head somewhere between the clouds and the aliens that most definitely inhabited Mars. I saw a world with dragons and imaginary friends and flying pigs. Reality was merely a suggestion and the possibilities were endless. However, around the fourth grade, a wicked being stormed my whimsical world, waging war against my mind’s eye. This being came in the form of Mrs. Dell.

Mrs. Dell was essentially a crayon-wielding warden, dedicated to using art as a vehicle to curb children’s creativity. An interesting approach—cleverly attacking the practice from within the system. She drew everything in meticulous detail on the board, with each line measured precisely to scale, using a yardstick that I always feared would end up on the wrong side of someone’s face.

“It’s not that hard!” she would exclaim to a class of eight-year-olds, pointing hopelessly at the three-dimensional hexagonal prism on the board that none of us could seem to recreate.

She would scream with the intensity of a murder victim over trivial transgressions, such as someone using the wrong color or sketching outside the lines. “What. Are. You. Doing?” she would howl, speaking to us like we were hearing-impaired toddlers from a foreign country.

If you wanted to borrow a pencil during class because, hypothetically, you snapped yours accidentally out of fear beforehand, you would have to give Mrs. Dell your shoe for the duration of the period in exchange.

“You’ll get this back when I get my pencil back,” she scoffed, creating the warden-prisoner dynamic that the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks was clearly lacking.

As much as I feared Mrs. Dell and genuinely believed she was in cahoots with some malevolent force, I could not bring myself to follow her instructions. During one class, we were commanded to recreate a mountainous Monet painting. A simple task, if we were world-renowned impressionists instead of nose-picking eight-year-olds. I attempted the feat, but with some minor adjustments. I added snow, skiers,

reindeer, and an Abominable Snowman, for good measure. Just before I began to sketch the peppermint mine for Yukon Cornelius to uncover with Rudolph, I felt a warm breath puncture the back of my neck. “Stop!” she roared, snatching my paper with her spiny hands.

With steam threatening to spew from her ears, she slammed the drawing back onto my desk, her bony fingers pointing out the obvious errors.

“Explain how you get *this*,” she asked, pointing to my paper, “From *that*,” she exhaled, motioning towards the board.

“Um, I just—the mountains reminded me of skiing, which reminded me of snow, which reminded me of Christmas, which reminded me of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” I offered anxiously as if I were on trial.

“Follow the directions!” she demanded, marching to the front of the room. On her way back, she scanned the other students’ creations, determining that they lacked the innovation and signs of early-onset schizophrenia that characterized my work. She grabbed another girl’s drawing and held it up to me. “This is what your paper should look like! It’s not difficult!” A sudden rage sizzled in my chest. Instead of erasing the extraneous details on my paper, I added more, filling every available white space with whatever popped into my piping hot head.

“The reason I want these to come out perfect,” she said, in a slightly calmer tone, “Is that they will be put on display at the art fair next week.” Our classroom erupted in an excited chatter, with students whispering, “Let me see your paper!” and “Will the best one win a prize?” and “Do you think Mrs. Dell will actually give me back my shoe? Because it’s snowing out and I have to walk home and frost bite is a real concern but I don’t

want to ask her.”

“Quiet,” she bellowed, prompting everyone to sit upright in unison. “I will determine which papers go on the wall and which ones do not. Start finishing up.” As an anxious student who strove to achieve perfection, it was uncharacteristic of me to rebel against a teacher. But Mrs. Dell brought something out of me. So, with a firm grip on my Number 2 pencil, I pulled a full-blown Pappy. I decided that one of the mountains would become a volcano in mid-eruption, spewing molten lava atop an anonymous female who definitely did not bear any resemblance to Mrs. Dell.

The other students in my group were amused by this lack of regard for Mrs. Dell’s authority, and in what felt like a peasant revolt, they began to veer from the instructions as well. One boy drew himself standing on the mountain with his friends. The girl across from me included the entire cast of *Spongebob* on hers. The girl next to me drew her own face onto each of the mountains, which was honestly a pretty self-involved thing to do, but her attempt was duly noted.

Two minutes remained in the class and Mrs. Dell announced that she would be going around the room to collect our papers, assuming they were good enough for the asbestos-ridden cafeteria wall they would be so elegantly hung on. She picked up at least ten acceptable papers, forcing face-cracking smiles at the students who had followed her directions. This unnaturally pleasant demeanor shifted as she approached my area of the room, picking up the first boy’s drawing as if it were covered in feces. She quickly dropped it from her grasp in disgust, sniffing out the other recalcitrant artwork nearby.

“Do you think you’re funny?” she asked my group in disbelief. We looked at one another and then at

the floor while she berated us for daring to have a spark of creativity in the children’s art class.

“It’s you,” she said, pointing directly at me. “You think you can just draw whatever you want. It’s toxic behavior.” Needless to say, our masterpieces were not selected for the prestigious gallery. And, to make matters worse, I was now a pestilential creature, infecting the innocent minds of those around me. Choking back the tears I refused to let stream down my face, I got up to sharpen my pencil, all the while avoiding eye contact with Mrs. Dell.

“We are drawing *mountains*,” she insisted. “Not what you *think* a mountain should look like, but what a mountain *actually* looks like. We are drawing reality, not your daydreams. Get it?”

I turned around with my freshly sharpened pencil, blowing the shavings off and staring back at her. I wanted to call Pappy and see if he might take a break from frolicking around to summon his band of creatures together. They could all sharpen their pencils, crayons, and maybe a pitchfork or two. We would all rush valiantly onwards, shouting, “Pappyland forever!” while holding flags that featured images drawn outside the lines. The gang from Pappyland would, of course, never resort to actual violence—this would merely be an intimidation tactic. Nevertheless, we would fight for the right to doodle.

“Hello? Get it?” she snarled again. The battlefield in my mind faded just before we could celebrate our victory via an outrageous parade through Pappyland. The classroom came back into focus.

“Answer me right now!” she added, for good measure. I felt the weight of twenty frightened eyes on me and, in one of the more badass moments of my elementary school career, said, “No.”

This moment came in a close second to the time I stole a flat, year-old Coca Cola can from the refrigerator in the teachers' lounge and then drank it in the safety of the girls' bathroom.

A simultaneous gasp seemed to suck in all the oxygen from the room. "Sit in your seat right now," she stammered. I obeyed, doubting my decision to be insolent with every step back to my seat. "Do you want me to tell your homeroom teacher about this?" she asked, very close to my face, which now matched the hue of the "torch red" Crayola crayon she held.

My audacity began to evaporate as I thought about Mrs. Dell reporting my behavior. "Yes," she would sigh, her hand on her forehead as if she might faint. "To a Monet piece nonetheless! She's dangerous!"

My homeroom teacher never approached me, so I was not sure if Mrs. Dell refrained from ratting me out or if the teacher discounted it, chalking her outrage up to a poor night's sleep. Nevertheless, it struck me that acting on my imagination could be considered dangerous. A self-awareness soon surged, prompting me to contemplate the degree of peril in which I existed. I was no child psychologist, but I reflected that perhaps meandering into walk-in closets half hoping to reach Narnia—something I did alarmingly often—might be a red flag.

We did not have a walk-in closet, but I had several friends and family members who did. "I'm just going to the bathroom," I would lie, and within minutes find myself knee deep in some forgotten Christmas decorations, headed for what I hoped would be the snowy, magical land. As a logical being, I knew that disappointment inevitably lay at the end of the closet, but an irrational shred of belief that there *might* be something

thrilled me to no end. What granted me some sense of solace, however, was that someone even more "dangerous" than me created the wondrous world, inspiring my wandering mind to tumble down a rabbit hole.

I therefore accepted the fact that a piece of me would always live in Pappyland, where the sun smiled on those who imagined.

About the Author



Kelley Barrett is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Communication Studies. Her honors thesis was completed in the fall of 2016 under the mentorship of Dr. Kathryn Evans (English).