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Final Draft

Lexical Semantics...and Scrabble

It was full, forcing competition to grow more fierce and tactical with every move. Tensions were growing, emotion beginning to factor in to every decision being made. Frustration, wit, and greed came to a head, reaching an ultimate climax. Bout after bout, mental exhaustion drained the reserves of both combatants; until, finally, I cracked. Pummeled and defeated, I let myself fall into an uncontrolled spiral of self-pity. I had lost to a girl. Final score: 257-96. My mother had beaten me, again. Scrabble was her game; her forte. She was consistently in her element each and every time she pulled those first seven letters out of the small pouch that ultimately contained my demise. Around the time I turned the ripe young age of ten, maybe eleven, we first began to play Scrabble together. My mother always spoke very bluntly with me about her intentions in playing this game. “[REDACTED], I will not take it easy on you, I will not let you win, so either you earn your victory or you lose.” And, ever true to her word, I lost virtually every time. That is, until I became motivated to change.

Even at a young age, I was always a hyper-competitive person. I hated losing. Winning was the name of the game; whether the game be called soccer, hide and seek, go fish, who can put the most grapes in their mouth and still be able to close it, or Scrabble, it made no difference to me. I wanted to be able to win. So, losing to my mother, time and time again, became unacceptable to me. That vocabulary vulture, that lover of lexicon, that bellow of bombast

upon my vocabularily virgin ears; somehow, (potentially due to the years of reading and absorption of knowledge she had over me) would incessantly beat me into the ground. In the beginning, it was my own pride that kept me from attempting to better myself in the ways of Scrabble. I reasoned that if I kept playing with my mother long enough, eventually she would slip up, have a dreadful game, and I would pull out the win. This not only would have given me the right to proudly say that I beaten my own mother of 40 years old at the age of 11, but also, I would then have the confidence to, if I would so choose to do so, challenge other older folks and attempt to topple them from a throne of glory. And back then, winning meant everything. I waited: game after game, week after week, month after month, for this glorious day to arrive, ready to lift me into victory. It never showed up.

After about five months of being humiliated, I finally decided that I was going to force myself to do whatever it would take to beat the closest female progenitor to my person, at her own game. The game of Scrabble is simple really; seven letters are drawn at the beginning of the game. Using these seven letters, the players form the most complex or the most point worthy word that they can muster, without using a dictionary or thesaurus. Players then build off of each other's words to create their own words, using usually one letter from a word that was previously played. Having a very broad and creative conglomeration of words was essential to be able to succeed. Resolute in what my own judgment had condemned me to do, I began a rigorous, self-inflicted regime in the art of word power. I would spend hours reading various reference books: dictionaries, thesauri, even encyclopedias (in retrospect, I am unsure how the encyclopedias could have possibly helped to better my own vocabulary, but in my now twelve year old mind, I am sure I had a valid argument for the use of such volumes of knowledge). I learned the ins and outs of etymology, and lexical semantics. I learned that instead of saying

happy, I could say blissful. Instead of careful, I could substitute meticulous; for basic, rudimentary. My studies into the art of defeating my mom at Scrabble actually, unbeknownst to myself at the time, made me a terminology machine. Like most machines, never would I tire, never did I lose that instinctive drive to keep becoming better, to win. I would literally be dripping sweat due to the intensity of my “workouts” so to speak. My weights were thousands of lexemes, and my muscle my mind. My focus was deep, my goal clear: crush Mother.

Judgment day: the day I would challenge my own flesh and blood to that game so deeply rooted into my mind, my being, that it and I were one. There was no way that I was going to let my endless hours of preparation be lost in vain, in despicable self-pity. Of course, my mother leapt at any chance to play Scrabble, the game she held most dear, the game that she had loved to play for years before and most likely still for years yet to come. To be entirely honest, I was awfully nervous that I had not prepared myself to the extent that was needed to conquer the land of the Scrabble board, of which my own mother was Queen. The game started as most Scrabble matches do: each player drew seven letters out of the draw bag, which were to be their beginning letters with which they were to make any word they could. And, also a common Scrabble experience, the first few bouts of words were fairly simple, and short. Nonetheless, the score remained close to being even. As the vicious engagement drew on, the gap between my mother and I became more and more evident. She, as always, was beating me. Then it happened. I gathered the perfect array of letters to spell the word limousine. Not only was this a word that, had I been previously asked how to spell before my escapades through various dictionaries, I would not have known how to spell, but it would also allow me to use all seven of my letters in one turn, giving me an automatic 50 points. Plus, by playing such a long word that actually contains nine letters, I would be building off of two separate words that had already been played,

which in and of itself is an accomplishment. My comeback had begun. The extra 50 points I had gained from my playing of “limousine” put me in the lead, and from there on I took control of the game. I played words like “hex”, “qi”, “jargon”, that, while rather short, earned me a plethora of points. It was something I had trained myself to do: search for the more uncommon, short words that normally would not be thought of; using uncommon words for an uncommonly large amount of points. Round after round, the gap between my score and my mother’s widened. I gained the occasional sensation of fright when she would play a word worth 30 or 40 points, but I remained in the lead; and so it was finished. Final score: 323-284. I had beaten my mother for the very first time in Scrabble. In my mind, I was gamboling the night away. She congratulated me, told me how proud she was to have a twelve year old son with such a wide vocabulary, and that upon the arrival of occasion in which we should play again, she was determined to win! I felt a sense of pride that rivals that of Olympic athletes winning a gold medal. I had triumphed.

At that moment, I felt accomplished. I felt good about myself. Looking back on the ordeal now, however, I realize that what I had done impacted me far more than I ever could have realized at the time. The literary base that I had created for myself was a solid, unshakable base. It pushed me through years of school essays, impressing teachers every single year with the advanced nature of my word choice. Many of the words that I became familiar with over the course of those days, those weeks of studying, I still use today. At the time, the effort was more than worth it, for I had outwitted the expert. Now, as I am further along in life and schooling, I realize how much I gained because of it. When all I thought I had been trying to do was to win one simple board game, I actually had been equipping myself with a lifelong knowledge and understanding of words that I otherwise would not have acquired; all thanks to Mom, and her extensive internal word bank coupled with an unwillingness to take it easy on her 11-year-old

son. Because she was such a wordmonger, and had raised me to be a competitive child, I obtained that ambition to self-enhance. Had she let me win, who knows where my literary level would be at today. Thanks, Mom.