

A kiss from Grandma

Penny Lane August 2012 (NSW)

My grandmother gave me many things: her pale skin that burns on a midday beach, her curly hair that fuzzes in the summer humidity, and, as Grandpa used to say, her eyes that hide in dreams.

My schoolteachers knew what Grandpa meant. The gentler ones said I was a daydreamer; the unkind ones said I was slow. Through school years of their ruler slaps, I looked out smeary windows into trees that creaked in the summer heat and dripped rain in the winter grey, while my classmates looked at the slip-slithery scribbles in books, and took turns to read aloud.

I was good at remembering things I'd heard, and could recite a page someone else had just read.

'We've had that page, Susan.' The teacher shook her head and moved on to the next student, and I sat as still as a tree trunk, rolling my eyes up to look into the curly canopy above my forehead.

I lived with my mum who worked in a hospital, mopping floors and washing walls. She came home tired every afternoon and did my homework for me because, she said, it saved us both a lot of bother. I sat beside her in the sausage-stinky kitchen, pushing crumbs around the tabletop with my fingers, and listening to the tap dripping seconds until the next school holidays, while Mum tried to help me understand what she was doing in my exercise books. She pointed a finger at the muddle of letters on page after page.

'Look: a is for apple, b is for bird,' she read, but all I saw was a mess of squiggles like my summer hair. 'Reading's easy,' she said, but it wasn't.

The teachers said it was easy too, if only I concentrated. They held up words on cards, one after a quickly disappearing other, too fast for the letters to stop their twirling.

At the end of every term, I jiggled in the seat of a clattering train, with a suitcase on my lap, to my grandparents waiting at a beach-town railway station. Grandpa took my suitcase and I skipped between him and Grandma to their house.

Music is another thing Grandma gave me. She made up songs as we paddled at the beach, she made up swing and slippery-dip songs in the park, and she made up cooking songs in the kitchen. We sat at Grandma's old piano in the sunroom, and she taught me to listen to the sounds in a piece of music and find the notes to play it back.

We strolled along the beach in the early mornings when the sea was lazy. Grandma said it was the nicest time of a summer day to be outside, and in the pale morning sun we didn't have to try to keep hats on our bouncy hair. When the days were too hot or too cold, Grandma and I watched out windows, our hairfrizz tangling together.

'See that caterpillar, Susie.'

We watched it slink slowly along the verandah railing, then down into a coiling vine.



'The teacher says I'm slow,' I told Grandma.

She looked into my face, combed her fingers through my hair and let it spring back into curls.

'Slow's okay, sweetheart. When the teacher says that, remember the early morning sea and the caterpillar.'

On winter nights I sat in Grandma's cuddle in her big, squashy chair by the fireflames and crackle, and Grandpa read to us. Stories like the ones about Winnie-the-Pooh for me, and bits from the newspaper that I didn't understand. On summer evenings we sat on a cane lounge on the verandah, and Grandpa read to us as birds chirruped softly into sleep in overhanging tree branches.

'Why do you do all the reading, Grandpa?'

'Because I like to read, and your Grandma has a gift for listening.'

Grandma and I listened together a lot: to Grandpa's stories, to the sea waves slurping in and out of beach rock crevices, to bird murmurings, to tiny creatures scraping and shuffling.

'Shhh,' said Grandma, so softly only a careful listener would catch it. 'You might be very lucky and hear the caterpillar crawling.'

'Shhh,' she said. 'You might hear the butterfly's wing-flitters.'

Back at home after the holidays, Mum read me letters that Grandpa wrote to us. Grandma always sent me a kiss at the end of Grandpa's letters, an x that I could read for myself, and every year on my birthday there was a very big X from Grandma in my card.

Grandma used to say she hoped one day when I was grown I'd marry a man as good as Grandpa, and I did. When we were first married, Neil and I snuggled together on the cane lounge that was now ours, or we squeezed into Grandma's squashy chair by our fire, and he read out bits from books he was enjoying. I wished he didn't like biographies of sportsmen so much. I had to lose myself in the fire blaze and ember glow when the details became too boring.

When I was pregnant for the first time, Mum sat with me one afternoon with a pile of papers on her lap, which she licked-fingered through until she found what she sought: my grandparents' marriage certificate. I saw a familiar kiss from Grandma amongst the typing and the writing scrawl.

'It's not a kiss,' Mum said. 'It's never been a kiss. That's all Grandma could write for her name.'

I trembled, I heaved, I cried for the loss of Grandma's kisses.

'It's never too late to learn to read and write, Susie. Give it a try, you'll find it easy, love, and you'll want to read to the baby.'

Hearing the word 'easy' tensed my face, my fingers, my every muscle. I'd tried and tried to read, but it was like putting a comb in my hair and catching it in a tangle before I could begin combing. My mum telling me reading was easy was almost worse than her stealing Grandma's kisses. Neil would read to the baby.



He did. He read through the books very slowly so Lizbeth could have a long look at every picture. I memorised the stories as he read them, and I remembered them later, turning the pages for Lizbeth when Neil was away at work.

‘Look, Lizzie, look at the bird; b is for bird.’

Lizzie gurgled at the pictures, and I kept each page open as long as her eyes were fixed on it. The words stood still and I stared into them: b is for bird. I slid a finger slowly along under the writing. B is for bird, and b is for book, and there I was, reading one, actually seeing its words as I said them.

‘Neil, I think I’m reading.’

Neil hugged me.

‘Oh, Suse, reading’s not easy, you know, and you’re doing it.’

‘Reading’s not easy?’

‘No, it’s like a jigsaw puzzle with thousands of tiny pieces, but much, much trickier. You have to fit letters and sounds and meanings together, and it’s hard going for a long while.’

It was, and having Neil understand that it was hard encouraged me to work at it until the reading became easier. Not easy, but easier. I began with the baby books, holding Lizzie close and warm, repeating every day what I’d heard Neil read the night before.

When she was fractious, books calmed her.

‘Sh, Lizzie, sh. See the ship, see the shell, see the shiny fish.’

Sh and sh and sh. There were patterns in the words. The puzzle pieces edged together. My fingers found the word patterns and played them like piano notes.

‘Listen, Lizzie, listen: words are like music - they’re sounds joined together, and the letters show us what sounds to make.’

I read to my children the stories of the three bears who liked their porridge cooled, of the tortoise who outwitted the hare, of Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet playing poohsticks from a bridge.

My children thought I was reading for them, but I was mostly reading for me. Sometimes a book lured me back onto my grandparents’ verandah and sometimes the fire I was sitting beside became my grandparents’ fire. I read to relive the beach-town holidays, and I read to reshape the childhood I had at home and school. I looked in second-hand bookshops for children’s books I’d missed out on; Grandpa wasn’t one for reading about Pollyanna or Black Beauty.

When my children were in high school, they brought home thick textbooks with long, tight lines of print. They looked like the textbooks from my own schooldays and I wasn’t tempted to relive the misery of those times, so I left the children to do their own homework. Once, though, I picked up one of the books and opened it to see short bursts of small-print words. They were poems, and I remembered that I’d enjoyed listening to poems in English classes, because they were like Grandma’s songs. After the children were in bed and their textbooks were lying in a sprawl on the dining table, I went through the poetry, finding verses I could read.

Those poems launched me into adult writing.



So I became a reader, and learnt that books can take me forward, as well as take me back. I'm a slow reader, but that gives me more time with each book, so maybe that's the best way to read.

Neil still reads out items from books and newspapers that he wants to share with me, and I occasionally read bits to him.

Now we have a grand-daughter, Millie, who is a clambering, rushing-around toddler, but when I sit with a picture book, the only place she wants to climb is up onto my knees and into my lap.

'Look, Millie: a is for apple, b is for books, c is for cuddles, and x is a kiss from Grandma.'

Winning entry in the short story writing competition "It's Never Too Late ... To Learn To Read", funded by the Australian Government Department of Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education, through Adult Learners' Week 2012 National Grant Funding. The competition was a partnership between the National Year of Reading 2012, and Tasmanian Writers' Centre.

