

By teaching Thomas

Rebecca Raisin August 2012 (WA)

I chopped carrots into miniscule cubes to add to the bolognese sauce. My five year old son, Thomas, claimed he didn't eat vegetables, excluding mashed potato, of course. If only he knew what was secreted away in his meals. Tonight's dinner would contain eight different types of vegetables concealed in the rich tomato sauce made from scratch. Obviously, I wasn't a good enough wife, but I made sure I was a damn good mother.

Thomas sat at the dining room table with an Avengers colouring-in book, that my dad, Neil, had surprised him with this morning. Thomas, delighted, could barely wait to rip the plastic off and begin.

I thought back to dad's visit, and the bombshell he'd dropped. He'd suddenly, and without any consultation from me, sold his bustling café, and retired. It had come as a shock. My father had built the tiny beachside kiosk he'd bought thirty years ago, into a busy café. He loved his job, his customers. He had a steady band of regulars, and he'd celebrated their birthdays, been there when they'd lost jobs, divorced, or welcomed a new baby. He'd been part of their lives, at least once a week, for three decades. My hunch was my dad; my protector, my best friend, had done it for me, but I knew he would never admit it.

When I'd questioned his motives he said, "I'm tired of working so much. I want to spend time with Thomas before he starts school full time. Your childhood passed in a blur, love. You were a gorgeous little toddler, then I blinked and you were in high school. Life flies and I want to be here when it matters, that's all."

I was taken aback. "Wow, dad. I can't believe it. You love the café, your customers..."

"Not as much as I love you and Thomas. It's done. Settled. I can still see my customers, only now I can sit on the same side of the counter as them."

"What are you going to do all day?" I asked. Dad worked from sunrise to sunset, and then usually strolled up and down the beach. His days were full of café life and beachside living.

"Well I thought I'd pop around here for a few hours on the days Thomas isn't at kindy. You can join the gym, or have coffee with your friends, and we'll have adventures.



I want to take him to swimming lessons, and to the park, and to the museum to see the dinosaurs...”

“Dad, is this because of Brian not being here?”

He looked at me, his deep brown eyes pools of anguish. Fidgeting with the handle of his coffee cup he took his time before saying, “Maybe, love. You can’t be super mum twenty four hours every single day, everyone needs a few hours to themselves otherwise you’ll lose that cheerful optimism we love you for. And I’ll get some quality time with my grandson.”

Tears welled as I thought about how lucky I was to have a dad who was so prescient. I loved Thomas with all of my heart and then some, but since Brian, my husband, had walked out on us, I’d struggled. Financially and emotionally. But I kept it in check. Thought I’d hidden it well. Money was sparse so I had to budget every cent. Dad would have lent me money if I’d asked but what kind of mother would that make me? And where would it end? We hadn’t heard from Brian in just over a year. He’d walked out of the front door and right out of our lives. He’d fallen in love with his secretary of all the horrendous clichés.

I walked over and hugged dad, and whispered. “Thank you.

“No need for that. Now off you go. Thomas and I have some Avengers to colour.”

Back to dinner, I added the chopped vegetables into the pot of bolognese and began to stir.

“What did you and Grandad do today?” I asked Thomas.

He stopped colouring and looked at the ceiling the way kids do when they’re thinking. His caramel coloured curls made him look angelic. “We took Buster for a walk, and then we came back here so I could open my Avengers book. But Grandad doesn’t know all of their names. So I went next door to ask Nelly who they were. I know Thor, and Captain America, and Hulk, but I didn’t know who the girl Avenger was.”

That was odd. “Why didn’t you show grandad so he could read it for you?”

“I did, he said he forgot his glasses.”

“Ah. Well maybe he’ll have to leave a spare pair here.” I said.

The next morning I awoke early, invigorated by a new idea. With dad agreeing to three mornings a week I would look for part-time work. Extra income would ease the burden of my budget, and give me back some confidence.



Dad arrived promptly at eight, carrying two take away coffee cups. “They’re doing well, the new owners,” he said handing me a coffee.

“They haven’t made any radical changes, then?”

“Not really. Everything looks like same. They’ve changed the menu, though.”

“Oh? What’s on the new menu?”

He sipped his coffee gingerly and walked over to the lounge.

“Dad?”

“Yes, love?”

“I asked, what’s on the new menu?”

“Oh. Sorry. Not sure, love. I didn’t have my glasses.”

Again? Either my dad was going through a very forgetful period or something wasn’t right. How could he forget his glasses when he needed them to drive? Needed them to navigate the T.V remote, use his mobile phone?

Maybe he was just having a rough week. With all the change lately and now the added responsibility of caring for a five year old child with boundless energy, he was probably just tired.

“So, dad. I was thinking of looking for a casual job the mornings you have Thomas. What do you think?”

He ran a hand through his thick silver hair. “I think it’s a great idea. And even better, I know exactly where you can look.”

“Where?”

“The café. They need a waitress for the morning rush. Beryl finishes next week.”

Beryl had worked at the cafe for years, the only reason she stayed is because she fancied dad, but as yet there was no hint of any relationship other than a platonic one.

“Beryl’s leaving? I hope you don’t lose contact.”

“No chance. I’ve joined her walking group. We’ll see each other every second day. She decided to hand in her notice and concentrate on her garden.”

Guilt at stealing Beryl’s job assuaged, I decided to go to the café immediately.



“Ok, dad. I’ll pop in now. Do you want me to drive to your place and get your glasses?”

Thomas ran in from the backyard with Buster in tow. “Grandad!” he bellowed as both boy and dog jumped on the lounge and into dad’s lap. Between hugging Thomas, and patting Buster he managed to say, “No, love. I think I’ve got a spare pair in the car.”

I walked over to the messy heap, and kissed their heads. “See you at lunch time, then.”

Another night, another deception, I thought as I pureed cauliflower to add to the potato mash I’d made. Thomas spilled through the back door tripping over Buster. “Time to feed Buster his biscuits and shut him out for the night, Mister.”

“Ok, mum. Then can I put a sticker on the chart?”

“Sure can.” We’d started a reward chart for pocket money. Each chore Thomas did earned him a sticker, twenty stickers equalled two dollars. He’d been trying to work out how much he’d need to save for an Avengers figurine. A lot it seemed. Those teeny tiny little muscle men weren’t cheap.

Thomas came back in a few minutes later and gazed at the chart on the pantry door, smiley sticker in hand. “Did you earn any stickers with Grandad today?”

“Yeah. I put the rubbish out, but Grandad didn’t know where I should stick the sticker. I said there are four jobs, and four sections. Where’s the bin bit, mum?”

“It goes; Bed, Bin, Buster, Toys,” I said. “Maybe I’ll put some pictures next to the words so you know where to stick them. Did your grandad forget his glasses again?”

Thomas pulled at the toggles on his jumper while he thought about it. “No, mum. He had glasses on in the car.”

What was going on? Migraines caused vision problems. Or was it something more serious? I made a mental note to ask Beryl at my job interview.

As I drove the familiar streets to dad’s café, I thought about the last few weeks. I was worried about dad’s health. He wasn’t the type to share his problems thinking he’d be a burden, laughable, after all the things I’d shouldered upon him in the last few years.



I pulled the car into the parking lot, and hurried into the café to meet Beryl before my appointment with the new owners, who dad had assured me, were lovely down to earth people.

Beryl, colourful in a floral apron, pulled me into a hug, enveloping me with warmth. She was a bundle of energy and looked good for her sixty something years. “Darling! It’s been forever.” She said and we pulled apart, her rose perfume scenting the air around us.

“You look amazing.” I said. She was tanned and fit from beach walks, and her eyes sparkled with a vivacity that never waned.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Once I leave this place, I’m going to step the walking club up a notch, but between you and me, that’s just so your father will come.” She winked, and cleared plates from a nearby table.

“Speaking of dad, have you noticed anything different about him lately. Anything unusual?” I asked.

She turned back to me, her face a mask of passivity, “Different? He looks a lot more relaxed that’s for sure. Why, what’s wrong?”

Dad and Beryl were good friends and I didn’t know how far to push it. After a moment’s hesitation I decided to be honest. If Beryl told him my concerns then at least we could discuss it.

“Well he seems distracted and Thomas said a few things that made me wonder.”

“Like what?”

“Well I thought he was just getting forgetful, with his glasses - that type of thing - but Thomas said dad couldn’t tell him where to put a sticker on his reward chart, even though he had his glasses that day, so I wondered if something’s up with his health. I’m just worried. Maybe he should see a doctor, but you know what’s he’s like with that kind of thing.”

Beryl’s eyes clouded and she turned away and began stacking cups on the counter.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It’s nothing. He’s probably just tired.” Her voice caught and I knew she was lying.

“Beryl.” I regarded her silent back.

“Beryl?” She turned to look at me, forced joviality on her face.



“What is it? Is he sick? Please Beryl. If he’s sick and you’re keeping it from me...” I burst into tears, mind racing with horrible scenarios. He was sick. He was dying. That’s why he sold his beloved café. I’d be alone. A single mother with no one.

Tutting, she put the cups down and grabbed my hand leading me to a table at the back of the café.

“Darling, stop crying. He’s fine. Strong as an ox. This must stay between us. Do you promise?”

“Yes,” my voice quaking.

“I mean it, don’t tell anyone, including him.”

“Ok. I promise.”

She whispered, “Your father can’t read, is all.”

“What?” I said, flummoxed. “Of course he can read! He ran this place for near on thirty years.”

Her kind eyes searched mine and continued. “He’s done a great job here, no question. Your mum did all the paperwork, and when she passed - God rest her soul - your dad confided in me and I took over. I did the orders, the paperwork, and his BAS statement. I even helped with the contracts when he sold it. Your father can’t read. He’s friendly and makes people feel welcome; he can make change and serve customers. Everyone jokes about him having a memory like an elephant, when he remembers a table full of orders, but that’s because he can’t read or write.”

Clarity dawned. The pieces of the puzzle clicked succinctly into place. Dining at a restaurant, and he’d order chicken. He always ordered chicken. We’d joke about him being culinary staid.

He couldn’t read the menu.

I didn’t have time to write in your birthday card, sorry love.

I’ve forgotten my glasses; can you open the mail for me, love? Anything important?

I’ve spilt a drink on my map book; we’ll have to ask for directions.

What a secret to keep for all these years.



Beryl said, "No one knows."

I was angry at myself for not noticing anything sooner. I could have helped him years ago. And my mother, like me, a highly strung perfectionist, before she died, made everything easy and idyllic for us, except this one crucial thing.

"Why live with something that's so restricting?" I asked.

"I guess he's used to it now. He copes, he has his ways."

"Why wasn't he educated properly?"

"He fell through the cracks, and no one picked up on it. Years passed and then he was too ashamed to tell anyone."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Beryl shrugged and said, "He thinks it's too late."

"It's never too late to learn to read, Beryl."

We said our goodbyes and I shuffled through to the office to meet the new owners. My mind was fixed on my father, not on the interview, quashing any nervousness I might have felt.

The new owners were laid back and looked like beach bums already, even though they were city people. Bubbly and friendly, they were fun to work for, but I couldn't stop thinking about dad being illiterate. It absorbed my thoughts so much that I knew I'd have to do something to help him. The thought of never being able to get lost in the magic of a book, to while the day away in bed when it was raining, made me miserable. There was no singular loneliness in life if you had the comfort of a good book. I wanted that for dad.

The morning rush had ebbed so I checked my mobile for any messages. There was a voice mail from dad telling me that Thomas was taking a nap after a busy morning at swimming lessons. He was zonked so not to rush home if I wanted to run some errands. Knowing dad was likely to nap too; I said my goodbyes at the café and headed into the local bookstore. I went to the children's section to look for a book for Thomas like I'd promised. As I wandered the aisle, I saw a section of DVD's on learning to read. A wave of excitement rushed through me. That's it! Under the guise of teaching Thomas to read by watching the DVD's dad would learn too.



I purchased the DVD's and some books about first words and sight words. I could teach both of them at the same time, without dad knowing I knew his secret. It's never too late, after all.

I arrived home to find dad and Thomas at the kitchen counter snacking on chocolate muffins.

"These are delicious, love. What's in it that gives it that gorgeous cherry colour?" dad asked as I bent to kiss his cheek and wipe crumbs from his shirt.

I was about to spell out the word beetroot, like I'd normally do, and blushed as I remembered how many times I'd spelt things to dad that I didn't want Thomas to hear.

"Chef's secret, I'm afraid. But it's red and rhymes with ah...meet-root!"

"Very clever. How was work?"

"Great. Busy. I stopped at the bookshop on the way home," I said, averting my eyes.

"Oh?"

"Yes, they were having a sale and I found all these great DVD's about learning to read. You know Thomas would really be ahead of the game if he knew the basics by next year. So I thought you guys could watch these intro DVD's while I'm at work. Then there are these books with first sight words."

Dad looked at the cover of the DVD's. I knew his mind was like a steel trap, and he'd remember the sight words if I told him them, like he did at the café with so many orders. If he could memorise a table of orders, he could memorise words until their shapes became familiar.

"Sounds easy enough," he said.

"Yeah, it's just the introduction to reading, so they take things very slow. It's all about repetition, that's why I thought if you watched them with Thomas he is more likely to stay sitting there and take it all in, rather than ask to watch cartoons."

"These sight words...what do I need to do?"

I flipped the book open, and showed dad the words and the correlating pictures.

"See, dad. Cat, hat, mat. I pointed to a picture of a cat wearing a hat on a mat.



“So you underline CAT with your finger, so Thomas gets to know that word.”

“And the rest?”

“The CAT wears a HAT, on the MAT. Visualise the word, and learn the rhyme. All three end in AT. It’s about learning the link between letters and sounds. CAT.” I sounded the letters out. “We can practice writing it, too. I’ll get the whiteboard.”

I went to the study and pulled out the whiteboard we used for drawing. I wrote the alphabet at the top and CAT, HAT, MAT underneath.

Dad’s eyes sparkled with unshed tears. Hopeful, he said, “It’s never too late, is it, love?”

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.

