

Reading between the lines

Margaret Visciglio August 2012 (SA)

"I wanna bust, I wanna gool, I wanna wead!" shrieked David from his pusher. Katy's son, Michael, also in a pusher, sucked his thumb and watched David suspiciously.

"David's English is worse than my Number Six Auntie's English," said Katy.

We watched as my daughter, Jacky, guided Katy's son, Robert, up the steps of the school bus and showed the driver their tickets. Robert turned to wave goodbye to us. Jacky, now that she was eleven, didn't wave. She needed to look independent around her friends. I sighed. It was hard to let my little girl grow up. At least David was still only three and a half. Still a baby, despite his ambitions to read.

"David means that he wants to go on the bus, he wants to go to school and he wants to read," I translated. "I've dug up Jacky's old Dr Seuss books. I thought I would start teaching him to read. You're never too young or too old to learn to read. It might keep him quiet for a while. You must get sick of hearing him yelling all day. Our houses aren't that far apart."

"Actually I will almost miss hearing him, now that I am going back to work. Trevor said I must return to the restaurant. He said it is difficult to get good staff and it would be good for me to get out of the house."

"But Ulrich has only been dead for three months," I gasped. I bit my lip, not wanting to remind Katy of her husband's death. It had been awful for all of us, watching as he slowly wasted away from cancer. Much worse for him, of course, and terrible for Katy and the children. Everyone admired Katy's courage. But I knew that if Katy's brother Trevor said Katy must go back to work, she would return to work.

A Chinese woman did not argue with the head of her family. With her husband dead, Katy would obey Trevor.

"What about the boys?" I asked. "Would you like me to look after them while you are at work?"

"No, Trevor has decided that Number Six Auntie will come and live with me. She will look after the boys. She will have Robert's room and Robert and Michael will share a room. Trevor said it will be company for me too, that I will not be alone at night. And of course, the boys will learn to speak Cantonese, which might be useful when they are older. I will bring food back from the restaurant, so my living expenses will be less. Also Auntie will cook and clean. So, all around, it is a very good arrangement."

I burst into tears and Katy hugged me. "Everything will be alright," she said.



“Sorry, I just think it is too soon, after all you have been through,” I sobbed. “And I will miss our coffee mornings. I’ll hardly ever see you.”

“I am not leaving Valley View, Elizabeth,” Katy said. “I will still be your next door neighbour. I just won’t be here all the time. I will be part-time at home, and part-time in the Scarlet Dragon. We will still be friends. And you can also be friends with Number Six Auntie. When she has cleaned my house, she will clean your house. She likes cleaning houses.”

“I’m not asking an old lady to clean my house. Anyway what is her name? I don’t know if I have met her before,” I said, blowing my nose. “You have got so many aunties, so I don’t know which one she is. I can’t say ‘Hello Number Six Auntie,’ can I? She must have a name.”

“Her name is Hing, which means pretty, but all the family call her Number Six Auntie. There were six daughters and four sons in my grandfather’s family. Because Hing was daughter number six, my grandfather said she should remain unmarried. He refused to pay dowry for another girl. And he said, it would always be useful to have a woman who would be a full time auntie. Every family has a child who needs to be cared for, or an invalid who requires nursing.” She bent to help me push David back into his pusher while her more docile son looked on placidly. She straightened up and shrugged her shoulders.

“So that has been Number Six Auntie’s life’s work. She would have come to help me with Ulrich, but my brother in Sydney had need of Auntie when his wife broke her arm getting off the ferry. So Auntie had to look after their children and do their cooking and cleaning for three months. And Trevor knew that I had you to help me, so I was alright and Number Six Auntie could stay in Sydney.”

I paused from adjusting the restraints in David’s pusher. He had managed to undo a couple of the straps and I didn’t want him escaping as he often did. I opened my mouth, but before I could say what I was thinking, Katy interjected.

“Don’t look at me like that, Elizabeth. That is the role of the unmarried auntie in our culture. Number Six Auntie doesn’t know any different, she never complains. I believe she is content with her life, even proud of what she does. She knows she is making an important contribution to the family.”

“I haven’t met her yet, Katy, but I do think it is sad that she didn’t have a chance to make a life for herself, to have children of her own. I think your Grandfather was cruel to control her like that.”

“But Hing has had a life, Elizabeth. She is always needed by someone in the family. If she had married it would have been an arranged marriage and she might not have loved or even liked her husband. If she displeased him he might have beaten her. And at least she was not left to die in infancy as many girl children at that time died. She is such a happy person; I know you will like her. She does not look down-trodden.



Because she never married, she has a sort of independence and also a kind of dignity all of her own. Believe me, you will love her. Everyone does.”

And Katy was right. My children and I fell under Sixth Auntie’s spell as soon as we met her.

Auntie came bearing gifts. I was amazed how little she was, smaller and slimmer even than Katy, who always reminded me of a tiny Oriental doll. Although Katy had told me that Auntie was almost seventy years old, her face was smooth and unlined, although her once dark hair was mainly grey with only a few black streaks. I decided the word that best described her was serene.

“She is not just pretty, Katy,” I said, thinking of what Sixth Auntie’s name meant in Cantonese. “She is beautiful.”

“Sixth Auntie has made bao,” said Katy. “She has brought some for you and for the children. She hopes that you will enjoy them.”

“Good boy,” said Sixth Auntie, patting David’s head as I thanked her for the pork buns. David hugged Auntie’s legs, which was unusual for him. He often took time to feel at ease with strangers.

“So you do speak English!” I said, smiling at her.

“That is about as much English as Sixth Auntie knows,” said Katy. She said something in Cantonese to the old lady, and Sixth Auntie smiled at me and bent her head. I bent my head back at her.

“Thank you very much for the bao, Auntie Hing,” I said. I was rewarded by an even bigger smile. I could not resist hugging her, although I was not sure if that was correct Chinese etiquette. But she smiled and hugged me back. I knew then that Auntie Hing and I were destined to become great friends.

After Katy was resumed her work in her brother’s restaurant, Sixth Auntie and I walked the children to the bus each morning. I decided I would teach Auntie English, and began by pointing to objects in the street, naming them, and encouraging her to say the word after me. Soon she knew the words for tree, dog, cat, house, sky. I elaborated on that by adding colours - blue sky, green leaf, red dress.

One day I found a Chinese magazine in a shop and bought it for Auntie. I was so excited that I phoned Katy at the restaurant.

“I’ve got a magazine for Auntie,” I said. “I’m going to take it over to her this afternoon when we go to get the kids from the bus.”

“No, Elizabeth,” said Katy urgently. “You must not do that. She would be embarrassed. It would upset her dreadfully.”

“But she must want to read something. You know what I am like, Katy, I couldn’t bear to live without something to read. I even read the backs of cornflake packets if I haven’t got anything else. You like reading too. But you don’t seem to have any Chinese



books in your house. Auntie must miss reading. The lady in the shop said the magazine was in Cantonese, not Mandarin, so I thought Auntie would like it.”

“No, Elizabeth. Grandfather did not approve of girls being educated. Sixth Auntie has never learned to read. Grandfather said it was a waste to teach her because her destiny was to care for family members, not to work outside the house. So if you take a magazine to her, she will lose face because she will have to admit that she cannot read. Once I saw her pick up a Chinese newspaper and she held it upside down because she did not know which side was up. I laughed at her, and she began to cry. I didn’t know she was illiterate until then, because she is very careful to hide it. I offered to help her to read Cantonese, but she said she is too old to learn.”

I was appalled. How could anyone not read? I could not imagine life without books. In fact, my bibliophilia was the main source of conflict between me and my husband, Frank. He called it bibliomania. Our shelves were full, and still I brought books home. I still do; I hide them under my bed, in the back of the wardrobe, all over the house. I am addicted to books.

“Auntie has had the most awful life,” I told my husband. “She can’t read. She’s been treated as a servant all her life. Katy says her grandfather nearly didn’t allow her mother to keep her when she was born because they already had so many children. It was only because she was such a pretty baby that she was allowed to live at all. That’s why they named her Hing. It means pretty.”

Frank looked up from his newspaper and shook his head. “We don’t know how lucky we are to live in Australia.”

“But that’s not all. Katy said there was a massacre in Nanking back in 1937. Aunty was four years old then, but she still remembers the dead people lying in the streets. The Japanese killed all the Chinese they could find. Apparently 30,000 Chinese people were murdered. Women and little girls were raped. It must have been horrible. It’s a miracle that any of them escaped.”

“It’s a miracle that she’s not stark staring mad. She is such a nice, gentle lady.”

“I know,” I said. “Aunty has carried that burden with her. And she has gone all her life without being able to read a book. If she could read, maybe she could escape that nightmare into a fantasy world occasionally. Quite apart from the fact that she would be more independent, able to fill in her own Medicare forms, all that sort of thing. I know I would hate to be dependent on people for stuff like that. ”

“Why don’t you teach her to read?” asked Frank. He looked at David, who was sitting on the floor turning the pages of ‘The Cat in the Hat’ and saying the words on the page. I still wasn’t sure if the kid was remembering the words I had said were written there, or if he was actually reading the text. But it was keeping David quiet, and he believed he was ‘weeding’.

“You taught David to read,” he added. “In fact, the silence is deafening.”

“I can’t teach Auntie to read Cantonese,” I protested. “I don’t speak Chinese at all.”



“No,” said Frank patiently. “But you have taught her to speak quite a bit of English. This morning when I was going out to get the paper, she said ‘Hello, Fwank, how are you this lovely morning?’ I was surprised, but I said ‘Fine, Auntie, and how are you?’ and she answered, ‘I am very well, thank you, and it is a nice day.’ She couldn’t have carried on a conversation like that a few months ago. If you can teach her English, I don’t see why you can’t teach her to read. You could start with something simple like ‘The Cat in the Hat’ and work up to more complicated stuff.”

“I will have to be careful, though,” I mused. “I don’t want her to know that I know she can’t read, and I don’t want to insult her or make her ‘lose face’ as Katy put it.”

“How will you do it?” Frank asked. “Will you teach her the alphabet? That would be pretty complicated, wouldn’t it, for a lady her age, coming from a different culture?”

“No, I think I’ll use the same method that I used on David. I’ll teach her to sight read words, then I’ll hope that she realises that words are made up of letters, and when she does, then I’ll show her how letters can be used to form words. It seems to have worked on David, and he didn’t have any culture at all, did he?”

“No, I think we all agree that David is completely without culture,” said Frank. “Although he has mellowed since he discovered books.”

I asked Auntie to teach me to make bao. I took David along with me, and a supply of Dr Seuss books; ‘The Cat in the Hat’, ‘Green Eggs and Ham’, that sort of thing. I installed David and little Michael on the floor on a mat with the books and told David to read to Michael while we worked. I thought it might give Auntie a taste for literature to see the boys enjoy reading.

Auntie worked quickly, mixing the flour and water for the bao dough using chopsticks, which always astounded me. Even though Katy had showed me countless times, I was still hopeless at using the implements to eat with, let alone to cook.

“I’m a barbarian,” I told Auntie. “I’ll never get the hang of this.”

“I do not know what barb...whatever you said is, Elizabeth, but I know you a good woman,” said Auntie. “And David is good boy. And clever too. He can read.”

“Reading is easy,” I said. “Look, this is an easy book. You could read it.”

“No, I cannot speak English, I cannot read a book in English. I too am old and too stupid.”

“Auntie, you speak English. You are speaking English now. And you are never too old to learn to read. And you are not stupid.”

She began to laugh. “But I had forgotten that we were not speaking Cantonese! So I am speaking English now. You have changed my life, Elizabeth.”

“So let’s change it a bit more. See, this is a cat. This is a hat. That word is CAT. That word is HAT.”

“That is a cat?” asked Auntie. “That is a funny cat. Cats do not wear hats, Elizabeth.”



“Yes, it is a picture of a cat for children. It is a cartoon cat. And that is a picture of hat on the cat’s head. This is the word for cat. And this is the word for hat. This sentence is written “The Cat in the Hat”.

Auntie put down the chopsticks, dusted her hands and examined the page carefully.

“This is the Cat in the Hat,” she said. I could see that she was intrigued. I turned the page and read the words to her, pointing to them, and then showing her how the words illustrated the picture beside it. She took the book from my hands and turned the pages reverently.

“So I could read this book,” Auntie said in wonder. “Elizabeth, you will please to show me how to do this thing? I would be very happy to read books. I am ashamed and sad that I never learnt how to read. I have always believed everyone is smarter than I am because I cannot read.”

“I know how you feel, Auntie,” I said. “I always feel dreadful when I go to Trevor’s restaurant and I can’t hold the chopsticks properly. I would be honoured to show you how to read. But first would you please teach me how to manage the chop-sticks correctly? Last time I made a mess on the table-cloth and I was very embarrassed.”

Auntie smiled.

I did learn to eat with chopsticks, but I never did learn how to make bao using them. I can do it with a fork. David still says mine aren’t as good as the ones Auntie used to make, although she praised my efforts.

But Auntie learned to read, at first the “Cat in the Hat”, then “Green Eggs and Ham” and “Sam I Am”. Later we progressed to the newspapers, but that was another story.

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