

Talking in tongues

Craig Henderson August 2012 (Victoria)

You learn to read one word at a time, just as you learn to walk one step at a time.

Walking is easier, once you get the hang of it. You just put one foot in front of the other, while learning to read is a constantly evolving challenge. Words change, as do meanings, and sentences meander into paragraphs or shrink to fragments.

The trick is to read between the lines; go beyond the words and immerse yourself in the story. A good writer invites the reader into his or her imagination, and then forces the reader to draw on their own resources to expand their understanding of a story or text.

And that's just what I'm hoping to do today—to delve beneath the story I'm going to relate, in the hope of finding out myself just what the hell is going on with my family.

I'm Ben, by the way. At fifteen, I'm already hooked on words and the strange hold they have over people. Take my family—please someone, anyone. Sorry, that's an old joke, and not a very good one. And as for my family, well ... maybe I should just tell the story and let you, the reader, decide what should be done with them.

It all began about a year ago when Dad started talking Italian.

Dad is not Italian. He's as Aussie as Vegemite ... er, Blundstone boots ... I mean, Bundaberg Rum. I know those aren't good examples, but you get what I mean. Dad could balance a stubby of beer and a meat pie in one hand at the footy, while he tore out his hair with the other and hurled obscenities at the umpire at the same time. Dad used to be the only person I knew who said, 'fair dinkum', 'struth' and 'bugger me', in the one sentence.

Everything changed one day, when Dad sat down to breakfast.

He turned to me, winked, and said, '*Buon giorno.*'

Fair dinkum, I almost choked on my cornflakes. I might have thought he was joking, if it hadn't rolled off his tongue like he was the Pope.



Mum was on another of her religious charades—full on Catholic, I think—so she just rolled out a Hail Mary and went back to scraping the burnt bits off the toast.

My younger brother, who is thirteen, has ADHD and OCD—doctors seem quite fond of acronyms—along with Tourette’s syndrome. Mum reasons it is God’s will that Joey was born with these afflictions, and only the will of God can take them away. And that is Mum’s great dilemma, since being denied a miracle by her own Lutheran God. Rather than lose her faith, Mum decided she must be barking up the wrong tree. She converted to Buddhism, Hinduism and Masochism, before doing the rounds of the other Christian faiths; the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Presbyterians and finally the Catholics.

But Buddha, Ganesha, and Jesus, Joseph and Mary had failed to deliver the goods, and Mum was ripe to test the waters of less mainstream religions. I guess Dad’s ‘renaissance period’ pushed her closer to those Gods who occupied the fringes of the religious pecking order. She started doing voluntary work at the library just to get out of the house, I think.

With Joey and Mum caught up in their own worlds, I suppose I was the only one that noticed Dad’s slide into an ethnicity that didn’t belong to him. My older sister, Melanie, had turned goth two years ago and was seldom seen during daylight. Mum had long given up trying to save Mel’s soul. I think it was the tongue piercing that finally threw her, or perhaps Mel’s *I do it with the devil* tattoo.

Either way, it was up to me to work out what was happening to Dad, and more worryingly, just what the hell he was talking about. I tried the library first, only to find all the Italian phrasebooks had been checked out, along with the How to Learn Italian CDs. I should have put two and two together right then, but hey, I’m fifteen and there’s a lot going on in my life. So, since we didn’t own a computer, I had to book internet time at the library after school and trawl through sites searching for translations to Dad’s latest utterings.

To begin with, Dad spoke a mixture of English and Italian, with the odd colloquialism thrown in. His native tongue gradually slipped away, though, sliding into pigeon English and then full blown Italian. By then Mum had taken up Hare Krishna, so our house became like a backpacker’s lodge.

Dad would walk into the lounge after work—and God knows (sorry Mum) what language he spoke at the council depot—saying, ‘*Ciao Angelo, ciao Beniamino, ciao Elena.*’

‘*Buon giorno,*’ I’d reply, the only Italian I knew at that stage.

From the kitchen would come Mum’s mantra, breathed over the latest variation of lentil soup. ‘Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare.’



Joey was busy killing aliens on the Playstation, muttering a ceaseless line of obscenities, head jerking to one side and his body twitched in time.

'*Non piu,*' no more, Dad would say, '*di niente,*' not at all. But Joe just kept ploughing those two-headed freaks into the ground.

'*Dio mio,*' God: oh my God, Dad would say, to which, unexplainably, Mum would reply, '*merde,*' shit! (Pardon my French ... er, Italian).

Again, I should have smelled a rat, but a few days later I discovered *Beniamino*, meant: son of the right hand. That threw a whole new light on the secret—or so I thought—meetings I regularly had in the shed with Miss November. And I couldn't help spending more time in the shed, considering what was going on in the house.

Mum had shaved her head—never a good look on an older woman—and incense drifted throughout the house, along with Mum's never-ending mantras. Dad had quit his job and moved into Joey's room, forcing me into Mel's abandoned crypt. No one bothered to tell me what was happening, I just arrived home one day to find my stuff had been transferred. You couldn't get any sense out of Dad by then, and Mum didn't seem to be around much anymore. I assumed Mel must have moved in with her creepy boyfriend.

Over the next couple of months things settled into an uneasy routine. Dad and Joey spent hours on end hidden away in their room, only venturing out for food, or the occasional burst of Playstation. Mum had taken up full-time study at the local TAFE college, and was letting her hair grow out. Religion had been put on hold for some reason. I still hadn't seen Mel, and Mum was deliberately vague on the subject of where Mel was and what she was doing.

I had a permanent internet booking at the library, where I headed every day after school to brush up on my Italian. Joey didn't go to school anymore. Apparently Dad was home-schooling him, which seemed a stretch considering the language barrier. I tried not to think about it all too much. Joining the dots together seemed a task of monumental proportions.

A week before final exams, the situation took another strange turn. I was about to set off to the library once more, when Dad pulled me up as I was walking out the door.

'*Scusi, Beniamino,*' he said, grabbing me by the hand and dragging me to the car. Joey sat in the front. He flicked the seek button on the radio so snatches of voice-overs and songs and ads dropped in and out and over each other.

'*Non piu,*' said Dad, '*di niente.*'



Joey took no notice, except to curse in time to each fragment as it was delivered on the airwaves. We set off into town, pulling up at the local greengrocers, Agnoletti's. Sounds like a type of pasta, I know. It clicked then, what Dad was up to. He'd finally had enough lentil soup in all its varied incarnations, and was desperate for some fair dinkum Eyetie cuisine.

I usually sat in the car with Joey on occasions such as this—Mum being too horrified of Joey offending someone. But Dad waved for us to follow, saying, '*Venire qui,*' come here. He took a basket and headed off to the vegetable section, while Joey, who wasn't used to this sort of freedom, held back.

Joey looked up the footpath in one direction, and then turned to look the other way. I half expected him to make a run for it at any second. At that moment, however, Luciana Agnoletti walked out of the store and began rearranging the fruit stalls on the sidewalk. Let me tell you, Luciana Agnoletti makes even Miss November pale into insignificance. Though only a year out of school, she exudes an aura of worldly confidence and femininity.

Joey was instantly drawn to her, while I searched for a Ben-sized hole to disappear into. Dad was taking particular interest in the tomatoes, lifting each in turn to his nose and inhaling, before trying another. Joey had moved to within arms reach of Luciana, who was repositioning the bananas in a manner that made me blush. She didn't seem bothered at all by Joey's attention, turning to smile at him.

'*Ciao,*' she said.

Joey's face twitched in response, and I prepared to run for the sanctuary of the car at the expected flood of curses. Much to my surprise, Joey stepped closer, somehow controlled the tics and contortions of his body, and nodded his head in greeting.

His lips parted, and instead of a staccato grunt of curses, these words slipped out: '*Ciao bella,*' hello beautiful. From inside the store came a sharp intake of breath, and the tomatoes Dad had been holding fell to the floor. His hands reached up to grasp his head, and I saw a strange look in his eye.

'*Santa merda,*' holy shit, he said. '*Bravo.*'

Joey's head dropped and his whole body seemed to shudder. His head twitched uncontrollably, and I knew there would be no holding back this time. Again, I was totally unprepared for what actually came out of his mouth.

'*Merda!*' he said. '*Testa di cazzo. Brutto figlio di puttano bastardo.*'



From the speed in which Mrs. Agnoletti rushed to Luciana and herded her away, I guessed Joey had said something worse than 'shit'. Luciana, however, seemed unperturbed, laughing as she was ushered away. This only angered Mrs. Agnoletti further, who turned and flapped her arms in Dad's direction.

'*Gran disgraziato,*' big disgrace, she said. '*Stupido.*'

Dad just shrugged his shoulders. '*Accidenti. Che diavolo vuoi?* What the hell do you want?

'*Vattene,*' go away, said Mrs. Agnoletti.

'*Va all inferno. Pezzo di merda. Che palle. Figlio di puttana,*' shouted Joey.

'*Vattene. Sbrigati,*' hurry up, said Mrs. Agnoletti. Then, glaring at her husband, '*Che disordine,*' what a mess, '*dicci perché tai ridendo,*' tell us what you're laughing at.

Mr. Agnoletti hurried to clean up the splattered tomatoes. Luciano called over her shoulder, '*Ciao, Joey.*'

Dad clapped Joey on the back, laughing. '*Bravo, Angelo, bravo.*' Then he bundled us into the car, pausing only to wave in apology to Mr. Agnoletti. '*Scusi, scusi, Mario.*'

Since that day, Joey's improvement has been amazing. His symptoms of ADHD and OCD have decreased to the point where he no longer takes medication. He's returned to school and is doing fine. He still has the odd bout of Tourette's, but it seems almost eloquent seeing he now curses only in Italian. His Doctors are uncertain of the cause of this turn around, though Mum harbours no such doubts. Joey is her modern miracle, and Dad his saint and saviour.

Dad, however, isn't doing quite so well. His decline has mirrored Joey's recovery. While Joey is now fluent in English and Italian, Dad barely talks at all. He watches TV all day or kills aliens on Playstation—his score now higher than Joey's. He's at his most animated swearing like a trooper, while killing off the alien hordes. The swear words are the only Italian he speaks, apart from praising Mum's recent penchant for Italian food.

Mum finished her TAFE course, and now works at the library. She still wears her hair short, but has given up on religion, for the moment. I passed my finals with marks in the top one percent of the state and have a scholarship for a hot-shot college in the city. I'm going to be a writer, and over summer I'll teach Dad to read English again. By getting Joey to learn Italian, Dad somehow forced him to let go of his compulsions and focus on something else. I figure I can do the same for Dad, but it may take a little longer.



The same Doctors who diagnosed Joey are yet to come up with a reason for Dad's condition. It could be a degenerative brain disease, or a psychosomatic response to the strain of living and working so closely with Joey for the last few months. Either way, the Doctors aren't putting a timeline on his recovery, or even suggesting he will get better. I don't agree with them. I've seen the power of words cure what medicine cannot.

I've already swapped rooms with Joey and can't wait to get started. I'm sure even Dad would agree it's never too late to learn to read.

Dad doesn't call me *Beniamino* any more, though he still likes to use *Angelo* instead of Joey. I found out *Angelo* means 'messenger of the Gods', so maybe that has something to do with it. As for Melanie, I suppose you are wondering just what happened to her. Well, she turned up the other day, though I could barely recognise her.

The doorbell rang and I went to answer the door, expecting to find the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, who still haven't given up on luring Mum into their fold. Instead, there stood a young woman with blonde highlights through the dark rinse in her hair. I counted only three piercing, and her face was almost devoid of make-up.

'Uncle Benny,' she said, drawing open the bundle of blankets in her arms, 'meet your nephew, Donny.'

I stood there, blinking, trying to extract her face from my memory. 'Mel,' I finally said, wanting to leap forward and crush her in my arms. 'Mel's here, Mel's here, come on,' I shouted.

Mum and Joey rushed out onto the veranda, followed closely by Dad. He walked straight up to Mel, took her face in both hands and kissed her. Then he lifted the baby from her arms and brought him up to his face, smiling broadly.

'*Donato*,' he said, '*un dono di dio*,' God's gift. And then he winked at Mum, nudged me in the ribs and said, 'Fair dinkum, he'll make a good centre-half-back I reckon, Benny.'

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