



The Fragrance of Words

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image info

A room without books is like a body without a soul. —Cicero

Carefully, I run my thumb over the spines of books on the shelf at the antique store. Old-fashioned lettering, faded covers, some still in excellent condition pass by as I scan titles. In the young adult section, black cursive attracts my attention—*To Dance, To Dream*. I pull it from the shelf, and a memory of my mother reading to me appears in the space inside my head where all memories live until triggered by a random event.

The cover depicts a young woman in a pink dress, a long swathe of dark hair curved over one shoulder. Her chin is tilted up thoughtfully as she looks into the distance, a far-away gleam in her eyes. In the background, a ballet dancer in a rose-colored tutu does a pirouette on a stage. My mother told me she always wanted to be a dancer, like Isadora Duncan. In a borrowed nightgown, along with several chiffon scarves, she whirled barefoot across the summer grass when she was a little girl.

On winter afternoons, tucked into a seat at the breakfast nook while snow fell outside, she read to me about Isadora, of course, and other famous dancers, such as the “ugly duckling,” Marie Taglioni; the “immortal swan,” Anna Pavlova;

Margot Fonteyn, a British ballerina; and my favorite, an “Indian princess,” Maria Tallchief. I identified most with Maria Tallchief since my father was also of Native American heritage, although he was Ojibwe and not Osage, like Maria. The stories of the dancers, their disasters and triumphs, the hard work to achieve success became a norm for my life growing up. I knew that acquiring a dream meant you had to earn it. Most of all, though, I learned that books took me to other places and taught me about setting life goals. My mother’s love for adventure—although she never journeyed far beyond Michigan—and her passion for reading gave me a solid beginning.

I first learned I was going to have a child in June of 1992. Somehow, I just knew the baby was a girl, a tiny blip in the radar of my stomach, a sweet pea, a rosebud. As soon as I felt her first flip, that mysterious gentle movement, I pictured her as a dolphin tumbling inside me, swimming through the water that gave her life. I began talking to her. “Hi, little one, what’s going on in there? Are you having fun?”

All the research indicated that infants tend to recognize the voices of those around

them, even prenatally. An article about the cellist Pablo Casals explained how he started to sight-read a piece of music and soon realized that he knew what was coming next. He later learned that his cellist mother had rehearsed the piece daily in the later stages of her pregnancy.

While pregnant, I read my daughter nursery rhymes, sang old songs, like “Hush Little Baby,” and on gray autumn days, I curled up in the most comfortable chair and recited one of my beloved childhood books, *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. I introduced her to the orphaned Mary Lennox who has come to live with her uncle at Misselthwaite Manor on the Yorkshire Moors; Dickon, her maid Martha’s brother and his gift of caring for animals; Colin, the sickly, spoiled young boy whom Mary finds hidden in one of the manor’s bedrooms. I read how the three discover a secret garden and return it to the splendor it once was. Much later, in elementary school, when she could read by herself, Senara already loved the characters.

Born prematurely, my daughter had a rough start in life. Her first few months consisted of two trips to the University of Michigan hospital in Ann Arbor—a seven-hour drive from our home in the Upper Peninsula—for laser surgery on a birthmark that became infected on her thigh. During the recovery process, as her wound healed, I distracted her with clever rhymes and brightly colored picture books until she fell asleep, her tiny cheeks tear stained.

As a toddler, she memorized stories I had previously narrated, and she repeated them back to me word-for-word. We lived with a hodge-podge of brightly colored cut-out letters, flash cards with pictures that

corresponded to the alphabet, and shapes she manipulated until she began putting words together. By this time, I was a single parent living in a small apartment near the edge of a woods where we left birdseed for the cardinals and walked down to the creek that ran across the property to dip our hands into cool water. She picked bouquets of forget-me-nots and dandelions and presented them with a flourish. I displayed her creations on the kitchen table in a vase she made me for Mother’s Day. Every night after bath time, I read her something new we had checked out of the library.

One of our best loved was *The Fiddler of the Northern Lights*. On starlit winter nights, we looked out the window and watched for the North Star to appear or for a glimpse of the aurora borealis, thinking about the fiddler. This is also when my daughter became enchanted with Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* series, adapted and illustrated by Renée Graef.

As I held my daughter close and read to her in the small home I had created for the two of us, I thought back to my mother and how I begged her for stories. She always dropped whatever she was doing, ironing or laundry or dishes, and we sat in the breakfast nook pouring over books. I did the same for Senara. Even late at night when I was exhausted from a long day at work, I would read *Good Night Moon* repeatedly until her eyes drooped and I crawled in next to her fully dressed and fell asleep too. When I asked her what her dearest childhood memory was, she said reading the tale about Bartok, the albino bat character from the Disney movie *Anastasia*. This was one she had memorized, including the voices, and even as a four-year-old, she was a tiny



comedian that made me laugh with glee at her performance.

As a pre-teen, Senara discovered the Heartland series, a story about a girl named Amy Fleming who helped heal traumatized horses using natural remedies. Although I wanted dance lessons when I was a child, my parents could not afford them, so when my daughter asked for riding lessons, I found a way to budget the money to give them to her. Once a week, I sat in the barn at Nottingham stables, watching her ride a pony named Firefly around the ring, her long ponytail flying behind her. This led to her lifelong love for horses. Today she is a lawyer and recently, with her husband, bought a farm where her ex-racehorse, Bourbon, and a rescue named LeRoy now live along with their Great Pyrenees, Bunker, and two ducks, Norma and Duck Wellington.

The importance of reading to children, even before their birth, cannot be emphasized enough. A special recollection that I have is of my third-grade teacher holding story hour each afternoon. We would sit in a circle on the floor, legs crossed, yoga style, and listen to a chapter read in her expressive voice. Two I recall from this time were *Follow My Leader*, by James B. Garfield, about a boy blinded by a tossed firecracker and how he had to learn a different way of seeing; and *Blue Willow*, by Doris Gates, in which the main protagonist, the daughter of a migrant worker, longs for a permanent home of her own. When Senara was in third grade, she told me her teacher read *Blue Willow*, first published in 1940, to her class. It is reassuring to me how timeless stories can be through the decades.

At sixteen I lost my father. One way of coping with his absence and the difficult life my mother and I led afterward was visiting the old Carnegie library in my small Upper Peninsula town, immersing myself in one book after another. Soon I discovered poetry and began writing my first tentative poems. One year later, when a journal accepted one of them, my proud mother saved a copy in her faded blue, what she called a “train case,” that she’d had for years. She only traveled once to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with my father and never used it again. When my daughter was in fifth grade, I helped her submit her essays to *Creative Kids*, a magazine for children. They published two of her stories.

All my life I have been surrounded by books. In my current house, five bookcases fill the rooms, each shelf bursting with novels, poetry, short story collections, and field guides that help me identify what I find in the natural world on my many walks. Although Senara is presently engrossed in legal tomes and briefs, I noticed the last time I visited that her own collection is growing and eventually she will inherit mine. Each volume will be well cared for.

The antique store smells musty, like leather and faded paper that have survived someone’s attic. It is the delicious fragrance of words and knowledge waiting to be discovered. As I hold *To Dance, To Dream* in my hand, I see my mother’s face. She never got to meet her granddaughter. However, the heirlooms she left were not jewelry or coins, but a heritage of reading and books I know my daughter will pass down to her own children someday. ∞

