

January 1994: St. Lucia, Brisbane, Australia.

“Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of who do the things no one can imagine.”

Of Alan Turing, Father of the computer, from *Imitation Game*.

The first day of school: This should be an exciting time. We, as a family, took the ‘official’ photo at the front of our house in St. Lucia, Brisbane. Nathanael, my eldest, age nine, wears a happy face. My second son, Nicholas, at five and a half faces his first day of school. His bloodless, white face displayed his inner terror. He was going to school, not by choice, but because the law requires children to go to school. My youngest, Isaac at two, was just happy. I was aware of the sweat dripping down my back. It is hot in Brisbane in January, even at 8.00 a.m.

Looking at the trees as we wait for time to pass, I saw a stick insect.

“Look Nicholas!” I say “You can take this to school today.”

Nicholas nodded his head.

“Yes,” I continued, “show your teacher what you found.”

Maybe, just maybe, having something to hold will help him through today.

His head nodded again. Fear oozed from every pore in his body.

He completed his first day. He didn’t get to show his teacher his stick insect.

Nicholas’ reticence at going to school continued. My blond headed little boy, in his grey school uniform, struggled each day to survive. In the morning, he stood frozen in the middle of his bedroom like an Easter Island statue, an observer to this world, looking lost, wondering what to do. He does not smile or laugh. I dressed him, without question. It was the least I could do. He does not want to fail, but he knows he cannot do what is expected. He leaves the house because he has to. That is the only reason he goes to school.

He saw his teacher at the front of the class. All the children know what to do – apart from him. He looked at the boy next to him, trying to understand the teacher’s instructions. His ashen

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face shrunk low to the desk. He does not want to be seen. He avoided eye contact with everyone, fearing his teacher's frustration, as once again he was the last to put his bag away, get out his pencils or move into line.

No more than a week passes before I was asked to meet with the teacher.

"How is he settling into school?" I asked, with a heavy heart.

His teacher shook her head.

"After 30 years of teaching, I thought I could teach almost anyone," she told me, "But Nicholas lives in another world. He spends most of the day staring into space. I don't know whether I will live up to this challenge." She continued: "I am not sure what he can do. He is so far behind. And he is being left further behind as the rest of the class settles in and is learning quickly."

I replied, "The preschool teacher thought he would be okay at school."

"Well," she responded, "he's not!"

Over the following weeks of school, I kept an eye on my son as he came home from school with the smell of urine in his pants, his fingernails bitten to the quick and no work completed in any book. He brought home early readers, which we read together.

Finding an excuse, I visited the school one lunch time. Many classes come together to eat their lunch under the building. Children have their lunch boxes out. They were all chatting and laughing noisily while eating their lunches. I finally spotted my Nicholas. He was sitting by himself on the concrete. He had set himself up a nice little barrier, his back to a central post. On his left, almost at arm's length, was his lunch box, opposite a little puddle of water. These objects formed a nice triangle; a triangle which ensures no one sat near him and discouraged all communication.

And so the year continues, I have constant concerns for Nicholas. I remember one morning when I felt particularly tired, exhausted by the constant awakenings caused by my youngest son who is yet to sleep through the night. Nicholas asks: "Can you take me to the classroom today?"

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Why today? The thought of carrying my youngest son up and down the steps to take Nicholas to his classroom was draining. Sadly this day, of all days, my own fatigue takes precedence over Nicholas' daily struggles.

I ask Nathanael, "Would you please take Nicholas to his classroom today?"

Nathanael stepped up and took Nicholas hand.

"Nick, come on. I will take you today," Nathanael says.

Nathanael did what I failed to do. Nicholas survived. However, to this day I remember how I failed my child when he needed me. I can only assume he needed more support, as events of the previous day were more traumatizing than usual.

Unfortunately, over the next weeks and months, nothing changed. I dressed Nicholas for school every day. As winter came, Nicholas' asthma grew worse. He was on medication, and we try to exercise. During one of our runs through the parks, he threw up; this puts an end to that particular effort.

I decided on a different tactic. A neighbor, an artist, offered to teach art to both Nathanael and Nicholas. She chatted to my boys and tells them: "Boys, in art there is no right or wrong! Whatever you do is meant to be!" This turned out to be a positive. Nicholas was happy doing something achievable.

There was one other positive in the school year. The grade One teachers worked together to present a drama of the book, *The Enormous Turnip*.

Children acted out the major characters; the remainder was part of a chorus, who repeated the words, 'and he pulled and he pulled and he pulled...'

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Picking up the boys from school, Nicholas says: "I've gotta tell you a story."

He was anxious and focused on telling his story.

"Can you wait until we all get home?" I ask.

Nicholas nodded his head, but he was very focused on 'his story'. I could see he can't wait.

Concern was written all over his face: I might forget all about this story if I don't tell you quickly.

I arrived home with all my boys, and got them out of the car. I threw the house keys to Nathanael, and say hurriedly:

"Would you take Isaac into the house, and get some afternoon tea. I will listen to Nicholas."

"Yes," says Nathanael. Nathanael took Isaac inside, while I can gave my full attention to Nicholas.

Nicholas, still anxious, followed me. We rushed to sit on a concrete garden ledge while he slowly, deliberately and meticulously retold the story of the "Enormous Turnip," each word dropping intentionally and deliberately onto the concrete.

He began: "Once upon a time an old man planted a little turnip and said: "Grow, grow little turnip, grow. And the turnip grew up sweet and strong, and big AND enormous. One day, the old man went to pull it up. He pulled and he pulled, but he could not pull it up." (Nicholas is shaking his head.) "He called the old woman. "Old Woman! Old Woman! Help me pull up the enormous turnip." The old woman put her arms around the man's waist and pulled the man. The old man pulled the turnip. They pulled and pulled, and they pulled, but they could not pull it up. The old woman called to her granddaughter. "Granddaughter! Granddaughter! Called the

Old woman, "Help us pull the enormous turnip!" The granddaughter put her arms around the waist of the old woman. She pulled the old woman. The old woman pulled the old man. The old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and pulled, but they could not pull it up. (His head shook again.)

The granddaughter called the black dog. "Black Dog! Black Dog!" Called the granddaughter. Help us pull the enormous turnip!" The black dog took the granddaughters skirt. He pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man. The old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and pulled, but they could not pull it up." (His head was shaking again!)

"The black dog called the cat. "Cat! Cat! Help us pull the enormous turnip!" The cat pulled the dog's tail. The dog pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man, and the old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and they pulled, but they could not pull it up. The cat called the mouse. "Mouse! Mouse! Help us pull the enormous turnip!" The mouse pulled the cat. The cat pulled the dog. The dog pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man, and the old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and they pulled and UP CAME THE TURNIP AT LAST!"

"That is my story!" Nicholas informed me.

"This is fantastic Nicholas! I love your story!"

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In his story, all the characters are there, in order. He re-told the complete story of the Enormous Turnip, slowly and meticulously.

The end of the school year was upon us. School suggested for Nicholas to be re-evaluated to give additional information for future schooling.

The test results were devastating.