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creative writing
workshops

The Small Print

by MaryPat Campbell

I'm quite illiterate but I read a lot. I love those huge billboards you see from the top of the bus in the middle of town, always at eye level. You can imagine the giant printing presses laying down each colour, designed to pass through a stencil in large spots to create the image. The colours invade my eyes and swim together beautifully.

Everyone I know hates Ikea instructions, but I'm in my element. I get calls from friends to come round on Saturday afternoons to help them with some god forsaken piece of put-it-together-yourself furniture, the instructions of which they can't make head or tail of and risk marriage breakup, or at the very least, tearing their hair out. This is my arena, and I can sort it out in no time. My friends are delighted and say I should get a job with Ikea, show them a thing or two about how to communicate their indecipherable instructions better. I can't read them either, that's what my friends don't know, but I read the diagrams and pictures no problem.

Anything that comes with a diagram showing how it's done, is fine by me. I work in the theatre as a props and set builder and I'm good at my job. Nobody knows I can't read.

"You have real flair, John," they tell me at work. I'm a good cook too and always buy those recipe books with clear, colourful photos, with steps one to five and a picture to go with each stage of the cooking.

I'm better with numbers and measurements. I can calculate and make anything, so I'm in demand in the theatre.

They always ask for me when there's a problem with something that comes back from the workshop too big or too small, and I can usually find a way to fix it. I have two pairs of glasses, which comes in handy as people aren't surprised if I can't find one pair and have to ask for help to read something. My boss said to me recently,

"Why don't you get some varifocals, John?"

But I couldn't do that could I? It would be harder to make excuses about not being able to read the small print.

I don't know why it feels shameful to be illiterate, but it does. My six year old nephew is learning to read, I love watching him point out the words and sounds with his finger. He follows his finger with his eyes and then he makes sounds to approximate the signs on the page, at least I think that's what he does. He gets fed up with it and sometimes throws the book down and goes to play outside instead. He reminds me of myself at his age.

I couldn't possibly own up to it now. I'm fifty. What would people think of me? I might lose my job. I've become an expert at hiding it and getting other people to read things for me when I need them to, without them even being aware of it. It's a real skill and I'm proud of it.

Sometimes I wish I'd been born in the days before reading and writing, before ink and pens and the printing press. When men were strong and could build anything, like me. When word of mouth was what people relied on, skills were handed down with repetition, stories and songs, learning through your hands how to work the land, build a fire, or a house, or a child's cradle.