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## The Lesson

by Lesley Dawson

“I can’t believe it. What you? Never.”

Moving house brings lots of secrets to light. Emptying drawers had produced a set of certificates from 1954. I had forgotten about them and hoped they had been lost.

“You went to elocution lessons?”

“You even have certificates, so you must have done well.”

I nodded my head, unable to speak and conscious of my increasingly pink cheeks. I had to admit that my mother had sent me to elocution classes.

After the great gales of laughter had subsided and all the comments about my Yorkshire accent had finished, I told the story of how this all came to pass.

I had somehow passed my eleven plus exam and was heading for grammar school, the gateway to a better life. Mum was concerned that I would be held back by my working class speech and asked around her more knowledgeable friends, who told her that Miss Gengue was the best elocution teacher around.

I was taken by my mother, she not trusting me to go on my own, once a week to this large house on the corner of a road at the better end of town. I cannot remember the name of the road. I think I just erased it from my memory when I was able to stop going.

This kind, slightly pompous and patronizing woman retaught me the English language. While I was with her, I pronounced words as she wanted - basket, bath and grass with a long letter 'a'. She professed to be very pleased with me but didn't know that once out playing with friends in the park I reverted to those words, basket, bath and grass with the shortest 'a' I could manage. What could I do?

After the first class my best friend, at the time, asked me what I had learnt. When I spoke in the way Miss Gengue required, she, and all the other kids, gathered in our den almost fell out of the tree laughing at my pronunciation. I wanted to speak like everyone else.

The discovery of my elocution certificates prompted another memory from the time when I was a physiotherapy student. Arriving home one evening my mother greeted me with the news that my grandmother had had a stroke. My mind filled with a picture of the worst stroke patient I had seen in my hospital placement of a lady who was paralysed down one side of her body. Fortunately, my gran recovered all her movements, but found she was unable to speak.

This was a big problem for all of us as we were used to her talking almost non-stop. A possible solution was that she could have therapy from a speech and language therapist. This middle-aged lady came to our house and spent an hour with my gran once a week. She then gave homework to her patient who had to read aloud from whatever books were in the house.

Never had my gran's reading list been so extensive. She read my dad's western novels, my mother's Woman's Weekly magazine and even tried her luck with my anatomy textbook. Mostly this homework was done during the day when the rest of us were out, so we had not heard her speak. Until one day I arrived home early, my lecture having been cancelled and as I opened the front door, I heard this very cultured voice. Thinking that the doctor or one of the ladies from the local church had called I stood in the kitchen and listened through the half-opened door into the living room. It slowly dawned on me that I could only hear one voice and tiptoeing in I spied my gran reading from a book.

"Wow, gran," I tried to say through my giggles, "you sound very posh."

She laughed herself and reminded me that her speech therapist was from London.

We gradually got used to having a foreigner in the house and I made it my job to teach gran to say the words basket, bath and grass with a short letter 'a', in the proper Yorkshire way.