

Once upon a time



- Brigitte Lavoie

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a little girl we will call Elizabeth, for the time being. She doesn't want to tell her real name, because she thinks this story is embarrassing and she says she is already shy enough, thank you very much.

As you will see, there is a lot more to say about Elizabeth, but for now, I will tell you about the time she decided not to talk, not even a little bit. She had good reasons. When



she started school, the big school that was on the corner of a quiet street, she learned that she had to eat lunch in silence.

Can you imagine? A cafeteria with 200 kids, all eating in silence? That takes a lot of imagination. Well, wasn't completely silent- there was the sound of forks

scraping on plates. And if you ask me, that's a lot more stressful and a lot less joyful than the laughter of children.

The first song she learned in school was "The King of Silence". There was a whole royal family of silence, and it seemed really important to the grownups that the children learn this song so they would know how to be quiet.

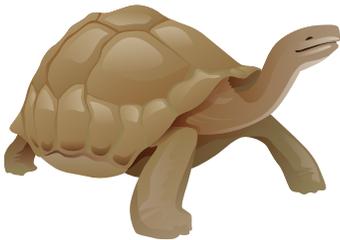
Elizabeth started to be a bit nervous with grownups who liked that word more than all the other words we can say. She didn't take any chances with the other words. You never know. She waited for the right moment to talk, and the best words to say, so she wouldn't get it wrong. But it never seemed to happen. How could she decide?

Because she didn't talk, she kept all of her big school books in her backpack, day after day, until her mother realized that her shoulders were starting to look like an old lady's, because she was carrying those books back and forth to school, every day. Elizabeth didn't understand that she could leave the books at school. I can tell you right now that when



Elizabeth's mother called the school, the principal didn't like the mother's words at all that day, and she wasn't too happy with the volume either.

Because she never said anything, Elizabeth was put in the Tortoise group. All of the children knew that the grownups thought the Tortoise group was slower than the Hares. It was like nobody had ever read the fable in that big book, where the tortoise wins the race at the end.



Elizabeth realized that her Tortoise friends didn't see being a Tortoise as a compliment (because it wasn't, really). They would all have preferred to be with the Hares, because nobody ever made fun of the Hares. But Elizabeth didn't say anything.

And then there was the time when she had a really big headache. She felt really sick and she didn't want to bother anybody, and she knew that she couldn't leave her class until recess. That's why she threw up on the floor. But if you think that's what bothered her the most, you're wrong.

She found herself at the front door of the school waiting for her mother to come pick her up. And while she was waiting, she realized that her head didn't hurt any more. Not at all. And she was scared. Would her teacher think she had lied? Really, she hadn't said anything at all, but she felt like she had done something bad. It's easy to think that when you are always trying to do something good.

Elizabeth didn't know what to do. Her mother had left work for nothing. If she went back to class, what would they say? So do you know what she did?

Every time I read this story, I want to get a time machine and go back in time to stop her at this very moment. But all I can do is tell the story so that it won't happen to other kids.

Because she was all alone with her thoughts, she took her little lunch box and hit her head with it 3 times- bang, bang, bang. And just like that, her headache came back. It hurt a lot, but she felt relieved. Nobody would think she had made it up.



I don't know if you feel the same way I do. Maybe you feel sad because Elizabeth thought this was a good idea. Maybe you feel angry because there was no grownup there to stop her. Maybe it makes you laugh a bit too, because it's kind of surprising.

Maybe you are thinking, "That can't be true!" Even Elizabeth was laughing when she told me about it. Sometimes, when we think it's better not to talk to anyone, we do things that are a little bit ridiculous. But when it happened, she wasn't laughing yet.



That evening, she decided to talk to her brother. One of the stories she heard in her family was the time her brother had kicked a nurse who made baby Elizabeth cry with a needle. His feet were only two years old, so the nurse said he was a good little boy for trying to protect his baby sister.

The nurse understood what he wanted to say, and that's not always easy when it comes to kicks. They are not always understood, because feet are generally not all that clear. Because of this story, Elizabeth knew her brother would protect her. But her brother realized that this was too much for him, that it was one of those secrets that you really can't keep. He talked to their dad.

At first, Elizabeth was a little bit angry, but her dad gave her a hug and said something she would never forget: "I always tell you that I don't want anyone to hurt my little girl. That goes for my little girl too." It's easy to understand words when they are warm inside. Elizabeth knew that he wasn't angry, and she wasn't either.

Her dad asked her to tell him what was going on in her head (before she hit it), with the words she knew, even if they weren't perfect. She told him she had been scared, that she didn't want to bother anybody. Her dad said that he was scared too. This was a big

surprise for Elizabeth, because her dad was big and strong. He explained that he was afraid she wouldn't tell him when she was sick, or when someone was mean to her.

She asked, timidly, "So you're not scared I will bother you?" He said, "No, not at all." He continued: "Do you want me to be less afraid?"

Elizabeth wasn't sure she was big enough for that, but she nodded.

Her dad asked, "Can you tell me your favourite story about your day and the story you like the least? That way, you can practice telling the things that are the most difficult to say."



Elizabeth thought to herself that her dad's fear wasn't a very big fear, because it was pretty easy to make it go away. But she had spent enough time with grownups to understand that they were really different from kids. Still, she wanted to make sure. She said, "That's all?"

Maybe it was because her dad could never wait very long before making one of his jokes, and they had been serious for a long time, but he said, "Do I have to make you a lunch box that is wrapped in a pillow? For next time?"

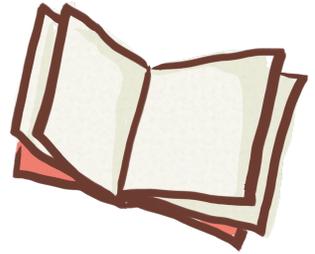
They both laughed, because her dad could be so silly sometimes. That's when the story started to be a bit more funny. She pushed him, and said, "Oh, Dad..." They both had the same idea, and they grabbed the pillows at the same time. Elizabeth's brother heard the pillow fight and he came to help.

They heard Elizabeth's mother yelling, "Gerald, stop getting the kids all riled up before bedtime!" That was all they needed to hear to keep going. They could all hear the smile in her mother's voice, and they knew that when that happens, the words don't mean anything.

The next day, Elizabeth remembered her father's words with the warm feeling inside them, and it made her feel brave. At school, she decided to start with the words that were in a

book, because she figured if they were written down, they were good enough to be said out loud.

When it was her turn to read, she read all the words out loud, in order, with exclamation points and question marks in her voice, because that's what was there at the end of the sentences. When she was finished, she looked up and realized that all the Tortoises were staring at her with their mouths wide open.



Her teacher said, "Elizabeth, you know how to read?" Of course she knew how to read. Her big brother had taught her every evening, all through his grade one year. He taught her the word "silence" first, but then he taught her all the other words too.



"Why didn't you say anything?" Elizabeth wanted to answer that nobody ever asked her, but she wasn't sure that would be polite. Her big brother had taught her that that was another word that was really popular with grownups. And it was her first time trying out words at school, so she stopped herself from saying it that time.

But she already knew what story she would tell her dad that night.

Do you know why stories start with "once upon a time"? Because that's what they are—just one time. If they weren't, we would start with "all upon a time." You thought Elizabeth couldn't speak. That would even have made a good title for her story. But this would have kept you from imagining all the other Elizabeths.

You might have even thought that Elizabeth was a bit mouthy if I had only told you about the day that she gathered all her courage and told the teacher that it wasn't a very good idea to name kids after animals that gave everybody a chance to make fun of them, especially when there were already lots of chances to do this, thank you very much. Because it's only in the fable that the tortoise wins at the end and that doesn't stop kids from making mean jokes. And if you don't think that was brave, you should have seen

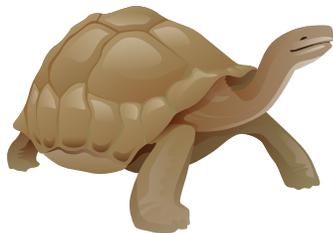
the teacher standing there, without saying a word, so she could listen. Which is really the best reason to be silent.

And what about all the times that Elizabeth went on vacation with her family? What about the times when she made new friends at the campgrounds before her parents had even finished setting up the tent? If I had started with those stories, you wouldn't have even believed the times that she couldn't speak. You might even have thought that I was thinking of the wrong little girl.

When we say once upon a time, it's like we forget all the other times. So we might think that princesses don't know how to fight, and knights are never scared. We might think a little girl can't read because she hasn't spoken yet. We might think her brother was violent because he kicked that nurse. And if we didn't know about the time the dragon used his breath to warm up the village when it was cold, we might think that all dragons do is burn down houses.

So, before deciding on the strengths and the difficulties of children, grownups, and dragons, we should take a good look at **all** the times, and maybe even look at them twice.

The end.



P.S. The next year at Elizabeth's school, there were no tortoises and no hares. All the classes chose their own animals, all together. The teacher still hasn't said anything about this, but sometimes actions are louder than words.

Questions for grownups:

Sometimes, a story should just be a story. These questions should never ruin a moment when you are reading together. But if they start a wonderful conversation and they are fun, I invite you to try them.

What stories do you like grownups to tell about you?

Is there a story you don't like us to tell about you?

What story would help us see what is good about you?

When you are a grownup, what story would you want us to tell about you?

Do you know the difference between secrets we should keep and secrets we should tell, like Elizabeth's brother did?