The Things You Remember

Cedric Collins*

*Iowa State University

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“Get up, Jonathan!” Beth yelled for the third time. She stopped what she was doing and looked up the stairs. A moment later, she still hadn’t heard his feet hitting the floor, so she put down the milk carton and started to climb. For about two months, now, Jonathan had been getting more and more difficult in the morning. When he was in first grade, he would fly out of the door and run to the car, hopping on one foot as he waited for Anthony to come unlock the passenger door for him. This year, though, things were different.

Beth reached the top of the stairs, turned right, and knocked on Jonathan’s door. “Can I come in, hon?” she asked.

“I don’t feel so good, Mom,” came the muffled reply from the other side of the door. “I think I got a high fever.”

Beth pushed through the door and crossed the room to the bed. Jonathan was completely under the covers, and she could tell by the shape of the lump that he was hanging on to Bruiser. Anthony had gotten Bruiser for Jonathan’s birthday, promising to get him a real dog as soon as they could buy their own house with a bigger yard. The chances of actually owning a house were pretty slim, now.

Beth pulled back the covers and smoothed Jonathan’s straight brown hair back from his forehead. “You don’t feel very warm, sweetie,” she said. “Are you sure you feel sick?”

“I’m really sick, Mom, honest. Take my temperature, I’m telling the truth.”

She went to the medicine cabinet and found the instant ear thermometer, one of many childcare gadgets she and Anthony had been careful to buy when Jonathan was born. It took about five seconds to flash a bold “98.6” on the electronic screen.

“Healthy as a horse, ya big faker,” came the proclamation. “Now stop messing around and get dressed.” Jonathan groaned as Beth crossed to his dresser and started picking out some clothes for him to wear. “Come on, I fixed bacon and eggs, your favorite,” she coaxed.

Beth went back down the stairs with her son in tow and got him seated at the table. She had gotten up early to fix breakfast, hoping that the sound of bacon sizzling in a skillet would have a motivational effect on the growing boy. Also, the cereals he liked were beginning to stretch the budget. They had already moved to Waterloo to find lower rent, and Beth didn’t think it would be possible to use that trick twice. She set a plate in front of Jonathan and
stepped back to watch.

Jonathan put his face in his hands and stuck his elbows on the table. “I hate school,” he told the toast. The toast stared back blankly.

“C’mon, what’s so bad about school?” Beth asked. “You loved it last year.”

“Last year, I was in class with Andy. Now I don’t know anybody. They all hate me.”

“Now, I’m sure that’s not true,” Beth protested. She sat down across the table from Jonathan and took a sip of her coffee.

“Yeah, it is. Last week, I saw a girl pointing at me and laughing in the lunchroom. Everybody hates me,” he asserted.

“Maybe she was looking at you because she thinks you’re cute,” Beth replied. Probably the wrong comeback to use on a second grader. Was he interested in girls, yet?

“No, she doesn’t,” he wrinkled his nose. “She hates me, just like everybody else. They make fun of me because I’m new and I can’t read as good as everybody else. Yesterday, in class, Mrs. Baker made me read out loud in front of everybody. She had to keep helping me finish words, and it was awful. I’m worst at it in the whole class, except for Bobby, and he’s dis-lect-ic, or something. Mrs. Baker doesn’t make him read out loud.”

“But you are good at math, aren’t you?” Beth said hopefully. “What’s two times seven?” she quizzed him.

“Fourteen.”

“There,” she gloated. “I’ll bet none of the other kids can do multiplication, yet. You’re a whiz, see?”

“Yeah, but Mrs. Baker hasn’t asked me to do multiplication in front of the class. Just reading,” he said gloomily. Beth could tell he was determined to stay grumpy.

She drained the rest of her coffee. “On your feet, soldier,” she said as she stood up. Anthony used to call him that. He smiled a little bit, and she steered him toward the door.

“We’re going to be late if you don’t get a move on.” She helped him force his boots over his growing feet and zipped up his coat, making sure to remind him to keep his hat on during recess.

“But Mom, none of the other kids wear a hat.”

“Well, then, their moms must not care if they get sick and die. You are lucky you got one who cares about you.”

He sighed and pulled the hat over his head as they headed out into the crisp Iowa winter.
The sun was blinding as it reflected off the layer of fresh snow which crunched underfoot as they headed for the car. The ten-year-old Ford Tempo started on the second try, and Beth watched her breath crystallize in front of the steering wheel while the engine got warmed up.

“I miss Dad,” Jonathan announced suddenly as they backed out of the driveway. Beth stopped breathing for a second, not sure what to say. She paused for a moment at the stop sign on the end of the street.

“How come you never talk about him, Mom?” Jonathan asked. Beth fought back the tears she felt squeezed into the little space behind her eyes. She still wasn’t sure what to say. Carefully, she eased the car out into the busy morning traffic.


“I think if you miss somebody, you should remember them. Sometimes, I don’t remember Dad as well as I used to. I wake up sometimes and try to remember his face, but I can’t.”

“What are the things you do remember?” Beth asked as they drew up to the school.

“I remember when he gave me Bruiser. I remember how he always let me stay up and watch reruns of M*A*S*H with him. He said if I wanted, I could grow up and be a doctor, just like Trapper John. He said I could be anything if I wanted.”

“He was right,” Beth said. They stopped near the front of the school. Yellow buses were lined up by the long curb, little kids pouring out in ragged lines. “You can be anything you want. You know what else he would have told you if he were still here?”

“What?”

“He would have said that anyone who wants to be anything should go to school, and if you work hard at it, it will get easier.”

Jonathan smiled. He knew when he was being manipulated, but right now it didn’t matter. Suddenly, he leaned over the gear shift and kissed Beth on the cheek.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too,” she said. Jonathan unbuckled his seatbelt and bolted out the door. Running up the sidewalk, he became just another kid on his way to school.

Quietly, Beth started to cry.