

Reading with My Dad

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It's one of my favorite nights of the year—Twelfth Night! Most kids have never heard of it and, if they had, would certainly not think of it as their favorite time of year. Twelfth Night, held on January fifth, signals the *end* of the holidays, meaning it will be another whole year before we get to celebrate Christmas again. Even worse, it's the time when everyone has to go back to school, the coldest and darkest time of the year.. So, why am I so excited, eagerly perching myself on the back of the sofa with a pillow and lying down across the top in anticipation? Because on this night, every year, Daddy sits down on the couch with his big volume of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, and opens it up to the play Twelfth Night. He's decided that it's a great tradition, and I agree 100%.

Zina, age four, is sitting on his lap, and Martha is sitting on the sofa to Dad's right, cuddled up against him. A couple of older brothers, Mike and Alex, are also there, sprawling on the floor or in a living room chair. They may have some homework or a copy of "Mad Magazine" in case they get bored. I am nine years old, and I can't wait.

Daddy clears his throat and starts reading in his actor voice:

"If music be the food of love, play on."

I am immediately swept up in this world of fantasy. I love everything about this play: the ship-wrecked heroine Viola having to pretend she's a boy; the beautiful but vain noblewoman Olivia mistakenly falling in love with her, believing that she has found the man of her dreams; the cunning and hilarious servants who play tricks on the royalty, especially the pompous Malvolio, who of course deserves it because he is conceited and mean. And most of all the final act, when all the disguises are discarded and the characters are revealed for who they really are. The nobleman Orsino, formerly smitten with unrequited love for Olivia, now realizes that it is actually the beautiful Viola whom he truly loves—now that he knows she's really a woman. And, wonder of wonders, it turns out that Viola has a twin brother who is just as handsome as she is beautiful, so now Olivia truly does get the man of her dreams as well! Everyone ends up with the right person and much celebration and nuptial merriment ensue, As the play comes to a joyful end.

As Daddy finishes the final lines, Zina has fallen asleep on his lap. He carefully closes the book and picks her up to carry her to bed. Martha and I, bleary-eyed, head off as well while the boys head upstairs to their bedrooms.

I think about how Daddy would stop to define some of the more complicated words, and to explain phrases that have become archaic; how he would let us ask questions and explain the complicated plot twists so that we could follow the story. So is it any wonder that I became captivated with the theater, with the love and romance, and the beautiful language of the Bard? This led to my love of poetry, great novels, and great plays—my love of all great literature. Not a bad start to our education.

Martha and Zina were much more advanced than I was. While I was hooked on plays, I would often get home from school or rehearsal to find both of them on Daddy's lap. He was usually reading to them from a large, beautifully illustrated cartoon series about the funny adventures of Asterix. I think it was about a little guy and his oversized buddy Obelix from Gaul, a place in ancient France, who somehow got involved with Caesar and Rome in the first century. I didn't understand much more than that because it was in French. And I would rarely join them. It seemed like their thing to do with Dad. As a result of this, both of them spoke fairly fluent French by the time they got to grade school.

Dad was so fun, and funny, and this type of education was a daily thing in our home. He made learning such a desirable and natural thing. I miss those days very much. I will never forget them nor the bond that we shared with Daddy when he opened these wonderful books to read to us.