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2018
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The Present



Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck

Illustrations by Elizabeth Goode



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Illustrated by Elizabeth Goode

Edited by Maxine Deans
First published in 2018 by Roots Resources
Printed by ABC Press
ISBN 978-0-9921857-5-6

Text © Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck
Illustrations © Elizabeth Goode

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Introduction to Literacy

Welcome to the third book in the Benjamin's Girl series, "The Present", in which we get to experience the excitement of Esther turning seven. It's so much fun to celebrate this special gift of another year and all the joy that goes along with it through the eyes of Benjamin, her inquisitive little bear.

Celebrating our children and their special talents and skills is something we should do more of, whether they are our learners in class or our children at home. It's about spending time together appreciating even the smallest things; sharing a joke; a bite of our favourite biscuit or laughing together about something as silly as a fly landing on our nose! It is when we are having fun that we connect and learn the most … and having fun does not have to cost us a cent!

As in our previous books, we would like to invite you to enjoy this story in multiple ways: book-sharing, reading the story, using it as a springboard to discuss new and interesting things with your child, role playing certain parts of the story or allowing it to inspire you to grow and enrich your child's vocabulary.

Of course our key invitation is to just do your best and to HAVE FUN with literacy, even if you have to "fake-it-til-you-make-it". Success with literacy development starts with YOU. Read the book, chat about it or just let your little one page through the beautiful illustrations and explore or imagine the story at their own pace. It's all about touching, feeling and experiencing literacy through books like this, magazines, letters, text messages on phones or even flyers and adverts when you go shopping. Literacy opens so many doors for our children, so let's turn the page and open up this special gift of a story and have some fun with Benjamin and his girl!

Benjamin's Girl -The Story

Exploring fun facts in literacy...

I must be honest, I LOVE CELEBRATING, and this story is packed full of bright and cheerful celebratory moments. Right from the cover of the book we know that somewhere inside this exciting story there is going to be a present … and although we have no idea what could be inside it, a wrapped present creates a sense of anticipation and this is a wonderful way to start reading a book with your child. In this section we will discuss how to use "The Present" in various creative ways to help develop language and literacy using our four categories namely: i) Theory of mind ii) Language development iii) Being deaf and iv) Maximising each moment. We chose these categories to give you some ideas and to stimulate your thinking about all the fun ways we can use reading as a true language gift for our children.

1. Theory of mind

Whenever we are around books we are modeling literacy to our children. Before we even open the book we can model some pre-reading skills by asking some open-ended questions: "Hmm, I wonder who is going to get a present in this story? What do you think will be inside the present? I am feeling quite excited!" These theory of mind words encourage our children to think in different ways, beyond the 'here and now' and what they can see. The key here is to wait and give your child time to imagine and then respond… sometimes the best thing we can do for our children is be silent and not give the answer.

One of the 'gifts' of literature is the opportunity for opening up many other avenues of discussion and language extension. These are the building blocks on which literacy and foundational reading skills are built.



Depending on the age of your child, you could do a book-sharing activity where you discuss what is happening on the page and what the story is about, as opposed to reading the story. One example of this could be when Esther comes down for her special celebration breakfast to find her present. Ask a question like "What do you think Esther's favourite colour could be?" (The colour of the balloon or wrapping paper could possibly be 'hints' of what it could be). This now gives a wonderful opportunity to make it personal… "What is your favourite colour?"

Being able to see that something is funny or odd, from Dad's crazy tie to Esther's strange choice in breakfast, and seeing the humour in it, develops as theory of mind does. In this way, rather than scrunching up their noses at her choice of scrambled eggs and honey, discussing that everyone has different preferences and that even if they don't like something others can like it … different is not necessarily bad. Another very curious thing is that Esther has chosen a "Christmas" themed birthday party and that Dad arrives as the Easter Bunny. Even though these examples may seem quite obvious for us as adults, the subtleties will need to be explored for little people.

Once you have read the book, you can then discuss with your child what you both think the title could be referring to: from the more concrete – her present from Mom and Dad, to more abstract theory of mind issues – such as Esther being the present for Mom and Dad, Benjamin being a daily gift as he loves Esther unconditionally, 'Deaf' being a present with its superpowers or even the unique things about her friends and their friendship (gifts of love, kindness and acceptance).

2. Language development

Being a parent or teacher of deaf children means our job of building and extending language (both their 1st and 2nd) is never done. We have created the Benjamin's Girl series (both the stories and illustrations) as a springboard for wonderfully descriptive and often new and challenging language.

Using interesting and often different words like 'black parcels' and not just 'rubbish bags' or 'peeling off the wrapping paper' and not just 'opening the present' shows children that we can play with language. Sometimes we use rarely used words, like 'gatecrashing' a party, and sometimes we can enhance things by saying it differently e.g. the child that arrives with the 'red nose' referring to being dressed up as Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

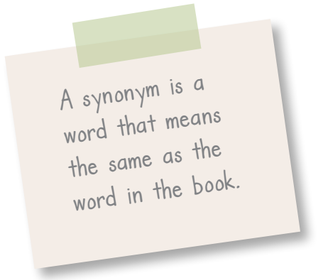
Another way of playing with language to make stories more descriptive and interesting is to use personification. This is used effectively in the opening sentences of the story when:

- the dogs shout
- the garbage trucks grumble and chew up the black bags
- the sun reaches in with her long fingers and tickles Esther

Opportunities for using interesting vocabulary or for expanding on language are everywhere and yet for deaf children these are often missed. Firstly, because incidental learning does not just happen and secondly because for you as the teacher or parent it can feel like a burden to stop and explain things all the time. Please be encouraged, every little moment you take and every little explanation you give will make a huge difference on their path to literacy.

Let's look at some more examples of these:

- Words that look the same but have different meanings e.g. RUN: running a race, a running nose, running water, running a business
- Words that sound the same (or look the same when reading the lips) but mean different things e.g. table set for four
- Words that are different but have the same meanings (synonyms) e.g. peculiar = strange



"Books have given me a magic portal to connect with people of the past and the present. I know I shall never feel lonely or powerless again." Lisa Bu

The use of synonyms is something key in expanding vocabulary for all children, but can be something deaf children are seldom exposed to if we don't know the sign or if there is just one sign for all. For example, the words large, huge, and enormous are three ways of describing something big. The easiest thing to do is just sign "BIG", however this is a wonderful opportunity to expose them to these synonyms through signing the word "BIG" and then adding the finger spelling (H-U-G-E), cueing the word or adding an explanation of the word after reading it.

Another temptation when reading the story will be to automatically simplify or change a word when we don't know the sign, for example to say or sign 'strange' for the word 'peculiar'. Let's be mindful of these automatic adjustments and simplifications as these can be missed opportunities to expand and grow language. Once again, for signing children this would mean to finger spell the word, explain it and then maybe make up your own sign until you can ask a Deaf adult. For children who prefer to listen or cue, the same process is followed with the cue and the word. Whenever new words are introduced, a key would be for you to try and use it a few more times in different contexts in order to repeat it and reinforce its meaning. When your child uses the new word be sure to make a note of it and praise them!

As a teacher or parent of a deaf child, please know that we both understand how exhausting this can be as we have personally experienced the unique challenges that parenting and teaching deaf children bring. Remember that sometimes it's okay to not want to read, to take a break or just do the easiest thing and not explain the difficult things. You may even want to sit down and take a breath as your child pages through the book without you doing anything… take this time, as language is a journey of many little steps, and start again tomorrow.

3. Being deaf

A hearing loss of any kind brings with it a unique set of challenges, from the need for amplification and their related expenses and responsibilities, to the need for technological adaptations including vibrating alarm clocks (amplification is not worn when asleep) and visual fire alarms and door bells. Whether your child chooses a more visual or a spoken communication, it is typical for deaf children to be visually far more astute and observant … this is highlighted in the story when Mom tells Esther that she is the best 'listener' she knows (ironically).

In South Africa we are a nation of multiple languages – with 11 official spoken languages as well as South African Sign Language (SASL) – and therefore issues of cultural and linguistic diversity are quite common. One of the key priorities is access to all that is communicated; and the issue of equal communication access for deaf people needs to be pro-actively implemented... whether one remembers to not stand with the sun behind you, ensuring that interpreting is available from/to SASL or cued speech, as well as ensuring when reading or directly communicating, that the environment is not too auditarily distracting (having the TV or radio on all the time etc.).

An example of this is evident during Esther's party when she stands up and thanks her friends for their gifts, both the wrapped ones and for their unique friendships. Some of her friends are signers, some sign and speak and some just speak, and of course we also know that her parents are hearing. In this story Esther chooses to use SASL and it would be the hearing people that need an interpreter, the total opposite of what we would usually assume… this then raises the traditional question of disability and who actually needed the accommodation?

In a refreshing and ironic contrast, Dad refers to the "superpower" he has gained since learning Sign Language, and though said in a playful manner we as teachers and parents of deaf children should embrace these unique gains which internationally are called 'Deaf Gain'. Some of this is explored when Mom and Dad explain to Esther that she has been a gift to them in many ways after which they then personify deafness and share with her how 'Deaf' has positively changed their lives.

4. Maximising each moment

One of the joys of literacy is the insight that books give children to new worlds and people… using their imagination to travel and experience things they would never have experienced otherwise. Stories also raise totally unrelated issues which create wonderful opportunities for teachers and parents to build both language and deeper relationships with their children. These could include facts, new themes and even fantasy or imagination. Many of these opportunities are crucial to take advantage of, as often they relate to general knowledgewhich hearing children pick up incidentally.

'Braai' is the South African word for barbeque- BBQ

Let's look at just two examples: Discussing Christmas in a South African context can raise the interesting geographical facts of typical northern-hemisphere wintery Christmases filled with snowflakes, woolly hats and crackling fires (which they will see in many children's books), in total contrast to our sunny blue-sky South African Christmases with braais and sunhats. Here one can even get out a world map or globe, depending on the age of your child.

On a more subtle and thematic note, one could talk about social stigma as it relates to special needs or disabilities, how some cultures are afraid of or see any form of disability as ancestral judgement or how hearing aids are often made to blend in with a child's hair to 'hide' the disability or the 'difference'. In this story, Esther's bright jewels are celebrated in bright and beautiful colours as evidence of a young girl who totally embraces her deafness and sees the access this technology gives her as a gift in a largely hearing world.

As we end this discussion I wanted to express how exciting it has been to share these ideas with you as educators and parents, as your roles are THE two most important roles in the lives of deaf children! We hope that you find this story and literacy a gift in some small way as you take the next step in your journey with your unique and amazing deaf child/ren.



Benjamin's Girl is an autobiographical storybook series based on the events and experiences of the Birdsey family who have three deaf children and a very dear Benjamin bear!

To all of Benjamin's new friends.
Roses are red,
violets are blue,
what better gift is there,
than the gift of YOU?



Benjamin's Girl

The Present

Some mornings are very noisy as the neighbourhood dogs shout about the bin truck which clatters and grumbles as it chews up the black parcels that line our pavements.





My girl is woken up each day by the long fingers of the morning sun as they part our bedroom curtains and reach in for a tickle. As she gets older she may need to get up before the sun. Mom will get her a special alarm clock, one that flashes, or even better, vibrates, as a little nudge of encouragement to start a brand new day.



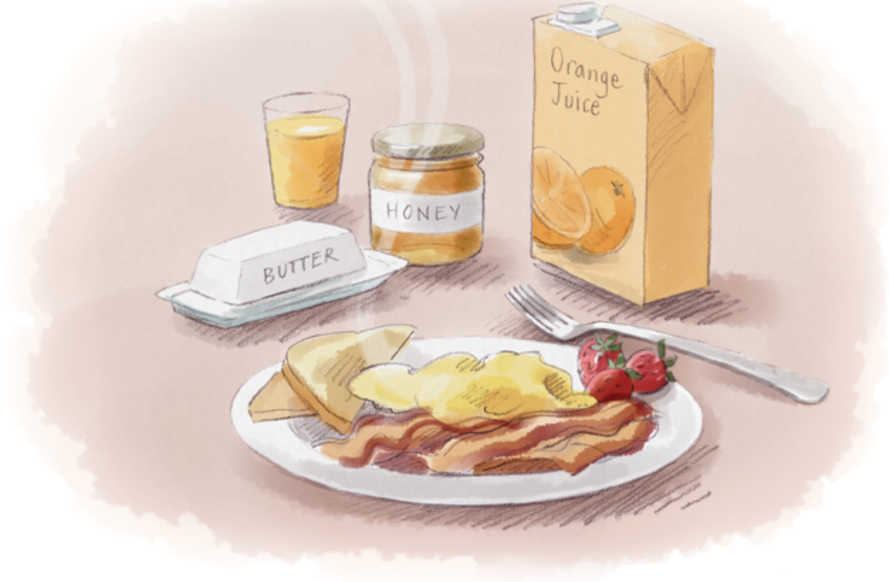
This morning was an extra special morning. Seven years ago today, Mom and Dad were given a special present.

Today is my girl's birthday...

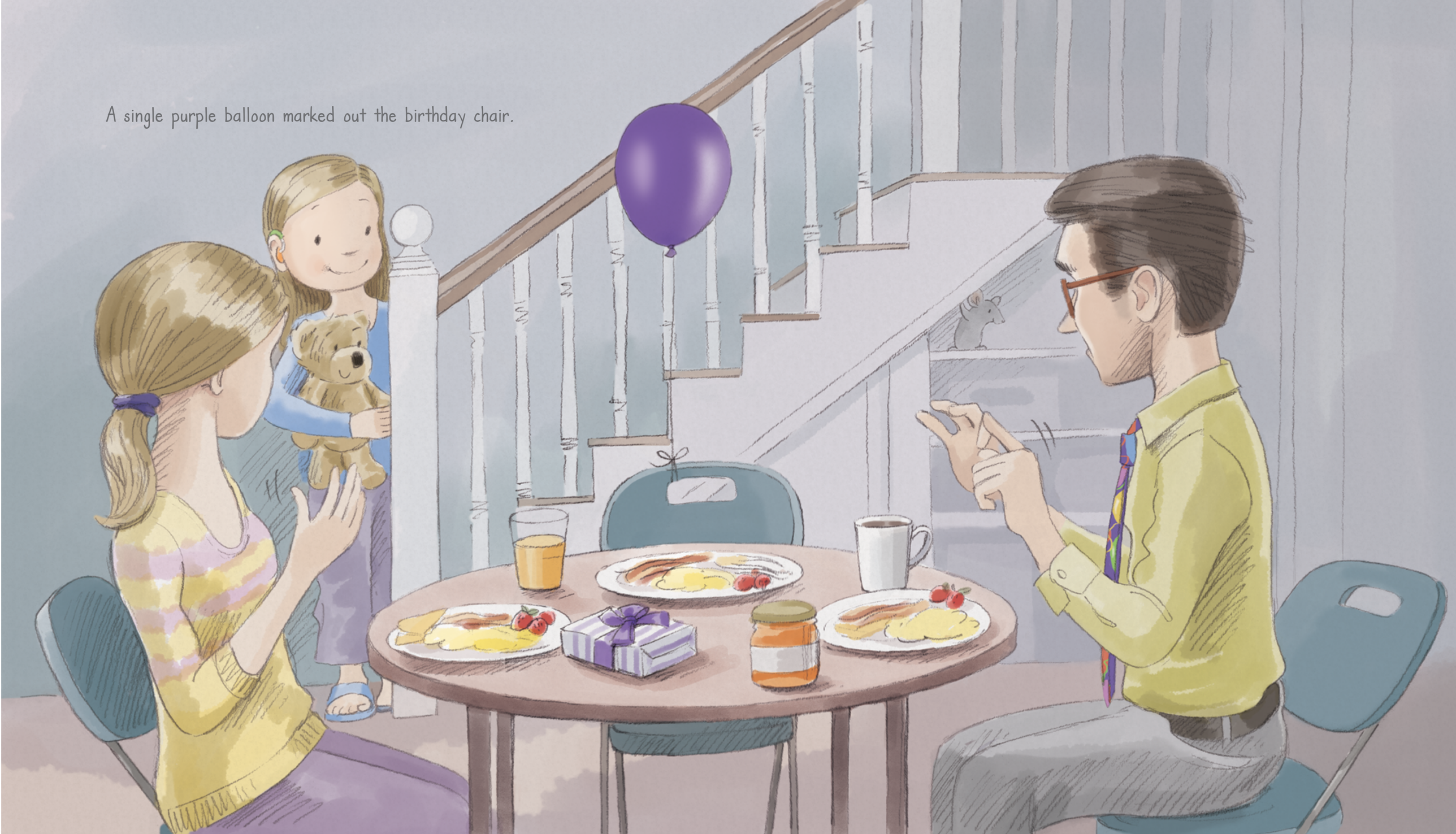




My girl could smell something delicious. Birthday breakfast! Downstairs she found Mom and Dad waiting for her. Dad had his birthday tie on. Whenever it is my girl's birthday, Dad wears it to work, so that people will say, "Nice tie! What's the occasion?" That gives him a chance to tell everyone, all day, about his special girl. The table was set for four; fresh orange juice and strawberries, and my girl's favourite breakfast – scrambled eggs and honey!

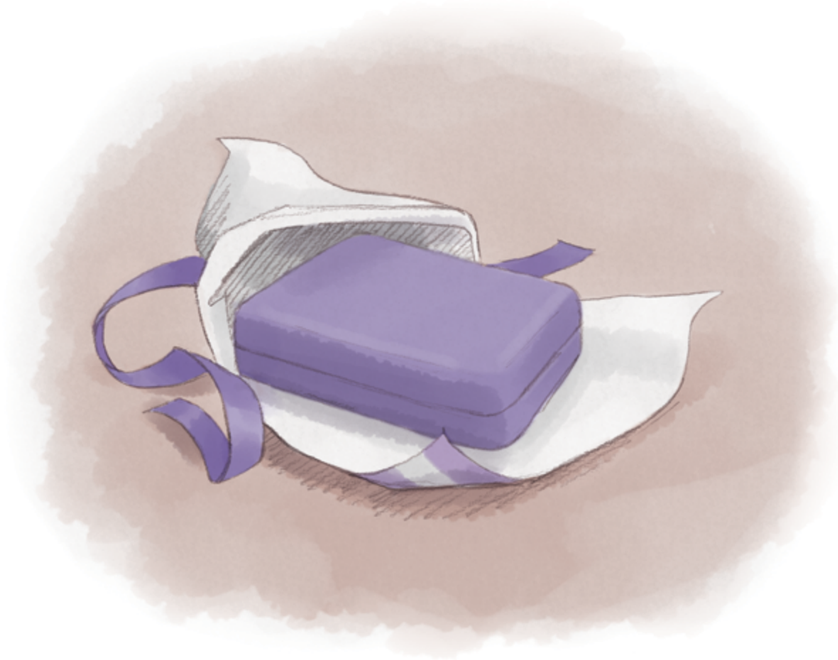


A single purple balloon marked out the birthday chair.



"Happy Birthday!" greeted Mom and Dad, as my girl skipped down the stairs. As she sat down for breakfast Mom handed her a little present. "I hope you like it!"





My girl peeled off the stripy paper to discover a velvet box. Inside was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

A silver pendant 'I love you' hand, hung perfectly on a purple cord. It was shiny-special. Dad offered to help clasp it around her neck whilst she munched on a plump strawberry. For a few moments we all stopped and admired the new treasure as it dangled against her smooth skin.



"This is the best present ever!" she signed, full of expression. I gave her a sly look. "Ok, well, Benjamin was the best, and this is the second best!" Mom and Dad laughed as they saw how she had read my mind.





"What was the best present you've ever gotten, Dad?" Dad then told stories of some of his birthdays as a boy, remembering his first fishing rod as a firm favourite.

"But you know..." explained Dad, as he glanced over to Mom, eyes smiling, "Mom and I share a favourite present... YOU! Seven years ago our lives were changed forever by a gift made especially for us... a present we named, Esther."



"You know, Dad and I had never met a Deaf person before, until we met you," said Mom. "We had no idea then, what a gift Deaf was going to be to us. Deaf has taught us to remember what matters most. Deaf has allowed us to meet new people and start an exciting (and sometimes scary) new adventure. Deaf reminds us daily that everyone is different and that different is beautiful."



"Hey, Deaf gave me superpowers!" interrupted Dad as he signed with one hand, whilst having a mouthful of egg with the other...

"I can talk **and** eat at the same time!"



Mom continued, "Deaf is a gentle teacher, she helps you to be patient and brave. You are kind and careful Esther, and I am so proud of you! You notice all the things that we don't see or we don't hear. In fact, I think you may be the best listener in the world, because you listen with your heart."



Mom was right, my girl is amazing! Deaf gave her so many gifts which she shares with others every day. Deaf gave us our special girl.

"You ladies have a busy day ahead," said Dad, fetching his keys to head off to work. "I'll see you at the party!"



My girl loves Christmas. She loves everything about it... snow globes and mince pies, spray-can snow and colourful lights! Later that day she would be having a Christmas themed birthday party, so there was lots to prepare.







My girl had invited a whole lot of friends and they all knew to dress up for the theme.



They arrived, one by one, each dressed in something Christmassy, bringing presents great and small.



One came dressed as a king, another had a red nose...



and someone else was meant to be a snowman.



There were shiny silver balls hanging from the lemon tree, striped candy canes, and golden Christmas crackers in the spaces between the plates of tasty treats.

As the last friend arrived, my girl wondered where Dad was; she didn't want him to miss the fun! Her sharp eyes noticed something rather peculiar at the garden gate. A white man-sized Easter Bunny was gatecrashing her party! It was Dad!

All the children laughed and cheered as Dad pretended to get the theme wrong. "Santa sends his apologies! He was too busy reading letters, so he asked his best friend to fill in. The Easter Bunny at a Christmas themed birthday party? That's all a bit confusing!

Holding a loaded basket of different chocolate eggs, Dad called our friends forward to choose a surprise treat.

What a beautiful basket it was, filled with chocolates of different sizes and colours.

Grateful for all the love, fun and friendship, Esther waved her hands to get everyone's attention. "Thank you for coming to my party! Thank you for all the special presents, I can't wait to open them.

As Mom reminded me this morning, the best presents aren't always the things we can unwrap or buy. The things that make us all different and unique, are gifts too. Thank you for sharing your gifts with me!"



Sticky and happy, the children went back home as a fun filled day came to an end. Everyone left satisfied and peaceful, not only because their tummies were filled with sweets and fruitcake, but also because their hearts were warm with love. Love that says, "Just the way you are is more than enough."

